

Kuro no Maou
vol.20 - World of Lust
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Chapter 375: Tempting lust

The Asbel Mountain Range runs from the center of the Pandora continent to the northern side, drawing a large arc across the land.

In the group of city states along it, there are beautiful views of the snowy mountain range, but these mountains also have a dangerous side, being designated as Rank 5 Dungeons.

At this moment, there is a certain party of adventurers walking towards Asbel during these early days of winter.

“... Was there supposed to be a cave out here in a place like this?”

As the blizzard that was limiting their vision subsides, the mouth of a cave that has been dug into the side of the frozen cliff appears right in front of them.

The one who spoke is the person at the front of the line of adventurers, Jimmy. He is a man of the human race who has almost reached the age of thirty. He lives in Asbel Village, at the foot of a mountain within Avalon’s territory. The Asbel Mountain Range is his primary working field as an adventurer.

He only works in low-danger areas away from the habitats of Rank 5 monsters such as White Dragons, Fenrirs and Tundra Whales, however.

“Hey, hey, our guide shouldn’t be saying such clueless things! Weren’t you boasting about how Asbel is like your back yard?”

The one making fun of Jimmy is the party leader, Michael. He is a typical power-obsessed fool who calls himself the Golden Hero.

Indeed, the fact that he is foolishly equipped with full-plate armor made of gold that not even an upstart nobleman would think of having made is proof that being a fool is part of his inborn nature. Incidentally, the greatsword on his back has a blade of platinum.

Nevertheless, despite being made a fool of by a real fool, Jimmy is currently

feeling bewildered rather than angry.

“No, I’ve definitely been around these parts multiple times,” he says. “I have a clear memory of this cliff, and I even know the shortest route to descend the mountain from here. But the last time I was here, there definitely wasn’t a big cave like this.”

Jimmy is a Rank 4 adventurer. He cannot enter the deepest parts of dangerous regions, but even so, he is a man who has spent long years walking around almost the entire Asbel Mountain Range.

He has only been hired temporarily to act as a guide for the Rank 4 party, ‘Golden Age,’ led by Michael. Jimmy’s knowledge of Asbel and his experience in climbing the mountains has even been officially certified in writing by the Adventurers’ Guild in Asbel Village. He is a professional, so to speak, when it comes to these mountains.

“Then it was dug by a monster, wasn’t it?” says Michael. “Heheh, if it could dig a huge hole like this, it must be a big one!”

There are many monsters capable of digging holes in the ground, such as Sand Worms and Mad Moles. The Elgrand Dragon, the supreme ruler of the Rank 5 Dungeon known as the ‘Elgrand Canyon,’ is powerful enough to dig a cave with a diameter of fifty meters just by passing through the ground.

But within the Dungeon that is the Asbel Mountain Range, there should be no monsters with digging abilities capable of creating such a cave.

“You’re planning to look inside it?!” Jimmy asks in surprise.

“Of course!” Michael replies, his face full of motivation.

Jimmy objects immediately. “It’s dangerous; you’re better off giving up on it. We’re currently equipped with gear for the snowy mountains; we’re not prepared to search a cave, are we? If you really want to go into the cave, we should go back to the village first, make preparations and –”

“Huh? As if we’re going to waste our time doing that!” Michael shouts. “There might be some crazy big prey in there; what if another party takes it while we’re gone!”

The chances of this happening are astronomically low. Though it is only the beginning of winter, the piled-up snow is already thick and Asbel Mountain Range has turned into a white snowscape. There are few adventurers who would go out of their way to venture up here.

Not to mention that if there really is big prey here, an enormous, high-Rank monster, adventurer parties who would be capable of defeating it immediately are rare.

“No, you can’t,” Jimmy insists. “It’s too dangerous. I can’t agree to searching the cave; I don’t want to go.”

“What did you say! I paid a lot of money to hire you, so why are you being such a coward! How can you call yourself a Rank 4 adventurer, the same as someone as great as me!”

“Now, now, calm down, Michael.”

Michael looks like he is about to attack Jimmy, but a young man steps in to gently stop him.

His name is Christopher. In contrast to Michael’s large build and grim expression, he is a handsome young man with a sweet, mask-like face that suits his soft, gentle smile.

“How about we perform a light search while Jimmy-san waits here?” Christopher suggests.

“Hey, hey, Chris, what do you mean by ‘light?’ Someone as great as me won’t be satisfied by anything less than a face-to-face interview with the boss in the deepest part of this place!” says Michael.

“You idiot, we still don’t know whether there really is a monster in this cave or not, do we? If we go inside, search the whole thing and there isn’t anything there, we’ll all look like idiots!” says a young woman, bitterly kicking the shining, golden armor at Michael’s shin with a clunk.

She is Jacqueline, the only female member of Golden Age.

With her small build and childlike face, she and Michael look like they might be parent and child, but surprisingly, she is actually the same age as him.

“That hurts!” Michael howls. “Damn it, damn it, my only weak point...”

“You’re full of weak points,” Jacqueline points out. “I wonder how many times you would have died by now if Chris and I weren’t with you. I mean, even the time you were kicked into the air by the Silent Sheep in the Iskia Hills —”

“Th-things from back when we were kids have nothing to do with this, do they!”

Michael looks enraged with tears in his eyes, while Jacqueline cackles. Christopher watches them with a smile. It seems that these three are childhood friends.

Two men and one woman is a party composition that typically causes the party to fail, but the fact that they have come as far as becoming Rank 4 adventurers together is a sign that they have built their relationships with each other incredibly well.

“Well then, we will go into the cave ourselves,” says Christopher, ignoring the bickering of the large man and young woman to come to a decision. “Let’s see, we’ll return in an hour. We won’t be gone for any longer than that; even if Michael throws a tantrum, we’ll make sure to drag him back.”

“An hour, huh... Alright, let’s do that,” says Jimmy, thinking that this compromise seems reasonable.

It would be cruel to tell these young adventurers, who are barely more than twenty years old, to not even take one step into an unexplored cave. He has no doubt that if he was the same age, he would have leapt into the cave in high spirits as well.

“I’ll leave this communication device with you,” says Christopher. “I’ll use this to report the situation in detail while we’re inside. Also, if the monsters who use this cave as their roost happen to return, please contact us right away so that we can do our best to rejoin you.”

He hands Jimmy an expensive Magic Item in the shape of a crystal ball that allows telepathic communication, which Jimmy gratefully accepts.

“Alright, let’s go, then! The first page of a new legend of the Golden Hero, Michael-sama, will be written here!” Michael declares.

“Shut up. Hurry up and go!” Jacqueline says impatiently.

“Well then, we are leaving,” says Christopher.

And so, the three members of Golden Age step into the cave.

As Jimmy keeps an eye out for monsters appearing from outside, the long-distance communication between him and the others begins.

“— How is it, Jimmy-san? Can you hear me?” Christopher asks.

“Yeah, the reception is good,” Jimmy replies.

The communication devices made of crystal are functioning with no problems. Less than ten minutes have passed since the others entered the cave, but Jimmy asks what the situation is like for now.

“There are plants resembling rose vines growing on the walls, but I can’t see anything else,” Christopher reports. “There aren’t any traces of monsters entering and exiting the cave, either.”

There is are no green plants to be found in Asbel during this harsh winter. Jimmy wonders whether there are plant-type monsters like Wood Golems or Dryads, but such monsters are generally weak to the cold.

At the very least, they haven’t been seen in the Asbel Mountain Range before.

“Be careful; there might be an unknown monster lurking in there,” Jimmy warns just in case, but his words are drowned out by Michael’s booming voice.

“Tch, it’s so empty,” he complains. “Aren’t there going to be a bunch of crystals coming out or something!”

“There’s no way you’d find crystals in a place like this, is there!” says Jacqueline.

It seems that these communication devices are shared by all members of the party. Of course, messages can be transmitted through strong thoughts, but with an open channel like this, speech is also transmitted exactly as it is spoken.

Jimmy wonders if he should warn them that they’re being too loud in an unexplored cave, but decides that it isn’t necessary and shuts his mouth.

The party of adventurers is already Rank 4; they are far above him when it

comes to pure ability in combat and it isn't a distant dream for them to be promoted to Rank 5. If they were the kind of adventurers who would let their guard down just because they're talking, they would have undoubtedly lost their lives long ago.

"For now, there's no signs of monsters appearing," Jimmy reports. "The weather is stable. Well, take care down there."

"Roger that – Ah, there is a fork in the path," says Christopher. "There is a left and right path, both about the same size. We will try following the left one for now."

It is possible that the cave has a complex structure with numerous branching paths, like an anthill.

"Don't forget to make marks to remember the paths you've taken," Jimmy reminds them.

"Yes, of course," Christopher replies.

Jimmy feels a little anxiety at the fact that the first branching path appeared so early on, but the search of the cave proceeds smoothly from thereon.

Jimmy quietly waits for time to pass, giving the report of, "Nothing unusual here," every few minutes while listening to the boisterous yet amusing conversation between Michael and Jacqueline.

"– There really is nothing but vines here," says Christopher. "It seems that thirty minutes have already passed since we came in, so we will turn back now."

"Oi, it looks like this cave continues quite a bit deeper than this," says Michael.

"Be honest, you're tired of this as well, right?" Jacqueline asks him. "There's really nothing here at all."

"Y-yeah..."

For now, Jimmy feels relief at the fact that all of the party members are going to be returning with no disagreement. There was nothing on the path they took, and since he has been watching the entrance, that means that no monsters have entered. There was only one branch in the path at the start, so

there is no chance that they will get lost, either.

Their safety is guaranteed – or at least, it was supposed to be.

“... They still haven’t come back?”

Far more than thirty minutes have passed since the last message from the party saying that they were coming back. Jimmy doesn’t have something as high-class as a personal pocket watch, so he is making estimates based on his sense of time as an adventurer and the position of the sun, but there is no way that he has made a large error in his estimation.

The reason no further communications have been sent is because they were simply coming back and there was nothing else to report. The party members also knew that there was no danger; considering how Michael and Jacqueline were acting earlier, they might be walking leisurely back out of the cave while having friendly conversation.

Jimmy can think of any number of reasons why they might be so late to return. But it is also true that he can feel anxiety slowly expanding in his mind.

Fortunately, however, Jimmy has an item that can immediately check whether they are safe. He simply needs to contact them from his end.

“Umm, how do I use this again...”

He did hear an explanation on how to use it once, but he has no confidence, possibly because it is a Magic Item that he is not accustomed to using, or perhaps due to his age. He wants to believe that it’s the former.

“– Oi, can you hear me, Christopher?” he asks.

“Yes, what is it, Jimmy-san? Is there something wrong?”

Jimmy gives a sigh of relief upon hearing a voice coming from the crystal ball. This one sentence is enough to tell him that nothing unusual has happened on the other end.

“No, I was just thinking that you’re taking a while to come back, so I wanted to check up on you just in case,” he says.

“I’m sorry, we’ll be coming back soon, so please don’t worry,” says Christopher. “Ah, we’ve come back to where the fork in the path was, so we’ll

reach the entrance soon.”

It seems that Jimmy has been worrying needlessly.

Just as he wonders whether he is so prone to worrying because of his age –

“– Jimmy-san.”

A message from Christopher arrives. Not even a minute has passed since the last message. Is there something that he forgot to say?

Jimmy responds without any particular misgivings. “Yeah, what is it?”

“It seems that thirty minutes have already passed since we came in, so we will turn back now.”

“... Huh?”

Jimmy heard this sentence thirty minutes ago. He doesn’t understand. “What are you saying?” he asks.

Is it some kind of joke? Even if it is, Jimmy has no intention to play along right now.

But the next response from the communication device is not an apology from Christopher.

“Oi, it looks like this cave continues quite a bit deeper than this.”

“Be honest, you’re tired of this as well, right? There’s really nothing here at all.”

“Y-yeah...”

It’s the same. It’s the exact same exchange that took place between Michael and Jacqueline thirty minutes ago.

“Oi, what’s wrong! If this is a joke, it’s in poor taste –”

“... What... you... –mmy-san...”

Jimmy hears an intermittent voice in response to his shouted question. He is just able to tell that it belongs to Christopher, but he can’t understand anything that it is saying.

“W-what is it?! Oi, what’s wrong, Christopher! Give me an answer!” Jimmy

demands.

Instead of Christopher's voice, Jimmy can only hear the ominous sound of rushing water coming from the crystal ball. Finally, communication becomes completely impossible.

"Shit, broken at a time like this?!" Jimmy curses. "This is why you can't rely on Magic Items!"

It has been decades since Jimmy became an adventurer. His sense as a veteran is telling him that the current situation is dangerous to the point of no return.

The message that was identical to the one thirty minutes before it. The Magic Item that suddenly broke. Jimmy isn't so optimistic to believe that a poor joke and this misfortune has simply happened to have occurred simultaneously.

"Shit, what do I do..."

He feels reluctant to enter the cave himself to meet the others.

At the very least, there is no doubt that they are physically unharmed. It doesn't seem like they have been attacked by monsters or become wounded in some unforeseen accident.

Even so, something unusual is going on. But the scarier thing is that they are not aware that anything is unusual.

"Christopher, please respond. Michael, Jacqueline, can you hear my voice?"

In the end, unable to make any careless moves, Jimmy has no choice but to continue trying to call out to them through the broken communication device.

Communication has not been cut completely; he can hear something that sounds like voices, mixed in with noise. Right now, he can only place his bets on the hope that communication can be restored.

"Please, give me a response!" he says desperately.

"— Jimmy-san."

At that moment, the noise finally disappears, and a clear voice replies to Jimmy once more.

“We’re connected! Oi, Christopher, what’s the situation down there –”

“Ah, we’ve come back to where the fork in the path was, so we’ll reach the entrance soon.”

At this point, Jimmy’s feeling that something is wrong turns into certain belief.

“Get a hold of yourself, Christopher! You’re saying the exact same thing as you said before! Wake up, damn it!” Uneasiness welling up inside him, Jimmy shouts and tries to tell Christopher about the unusual phenomenon that is occurring.

“Alright, let’s go, then! The first page of a new legend of the Golden Hero, Michael-sama, will be written here!”

“You idiot, we still don’t know whether there really is a monster in this cave or not, do we? If we go inside, search the whole thing and there isn’t anything there, we’ll all look like idiots!”

The only responses Jimmy hears are repeats of past sentences. The conversation between Michael and Jacqueline isn’t even connected anymore.

They’ve gone mad. That’s the only thing that Jimmy can understand.

“Shit, what is this... What the hell is going – UWAH?!”

As Jimmy is dumbfounded at this exceptionally strange situation, smoke suddenly rises from the cave that he has been staring into and envelops him. It is not the black smoke that accompanies combustion, but an ominous smoke with a vivid pink color.

“What is this, poisonous gas?!”

Despite his long years as an adventurer, this is the first time Jimmy has seen this. But even a child from the village would be able to tell that this shocking-pink-colored smoke is dangerous.

Jimmy knows this as well. He is now out of options other than to escape from the cave.

Using Air Walker, he somehow barely manages to succeed in escaping the pink gas that has filled up the cavern’s entrance in the blink of an eye.

Just as Jimmy hurls himself into the pure-white snow, the dense smoke billows out from the cave's entrance as if there is a large fire burning inside.

"Haah... haah... Christopher, Michael, Jacqueline... Please... respond..."

With nothing to lose, Jimmy calls out to the crystal ball that he is tightly grasping, still lying in the snow.

There is no noise. Communication is stable. But the words that immediately come from the other side are completely 'abnormal.'

"Ah, Mama... Mama, look, I've become a hero... I'm the strongest in the world, sparkling and gold, the coolest in the world... So, Mama, praise me, praise me more and hug me tightly."

These words that sound like those of a spoilt young child, could they perhaps be Michael's? It is unimaginable considering his grim appearance and proud attitude, but the deep tone of the voice makes it unquestionably clear that it is indeed him speaking.

"Fufu, ufufu, stop it, you two... Don't fight over me... I just want to get along with you two, just like when we were children... It makes me happy to know that you feel that way, but... Fufu, I'm sorry for causing a misunderstanding."

The next voice Jimmy hears is Jacqueline's. These are the words of a foolish, conceited woman who is pretending to be troubled by two different men courting her. The two men fighting over her are Michael and Christopher, perhaps? There is no way to confirm this now.

"I'm happy, Michael... You've finally noticed my feelings, haven't you... Yes, yes, that's right, we don't need a woman like that anymore. From now on, it'll just be the two of us, we'll be fine with just the two of us... I love you."

Is Christopher's voice speaking his true feelings? Jimmy desperately hopes that Christopher is simply blurting out false words due to his current crazy mental state.

"Haha... Damn it, everyone's gone mad —" Letting out a dry laugh, Jimmy slowly gets to his feet.

He looks at the cave to see that the pink smoke spouting out has completely

vanished and the cave has returned to its original, gaping appearance. At a glance, it looks just like any other cave.

“– Damn it! What the hell happened!”

Jimmy can't make sense of anything at all.

The only thing that he is certain of is that those three young, promising adventurers will never come back alive.

Chapter 376: Revival Catacombs - Final Floor

The completely-serious, no-fooling-around Rank 5 quest that Fiona chose, 'Lich Extermination,' is finally approaching the final stages of completion. The month has changed from Blue Moon to the Month of Frozen Soil, the equivalent of November, and the date is the 10th. Precisely one month after the quest was accepted.

I get the feeling that this quest has taken a long time compared to the quests that we've done in the past, but considering that we're trying to completely clear a Dungeon, this is normal. In fact, having taken only a month to come this far could probably be considered swift progress.

"We're finally at the last floor, let's not let our guard down and –"

A loud gunshot rings out, cutting off my words. Its echo is deafening in this dark, cramped corridor of the underground tomb.

"Zwei, you have to listen properly to what Kurono says," says Lily.

"Sorry, my lord." Lily's servant, the Living Dead that she has named Zwei, apologizes to me as it bends its body forward in a right-angle-shaped bow.

Just like the first time I saw him when he was carrying a bed into the dormitory, he's equipped with a smiley-face iron mask and a pitch-black surcoat. He loyally follows Lily's commands, but he's still creepy.

Incidentally, "My lord" refers not to Lily, but to me. I guess it's been set that way because I'm the party leader. But when it suddenly called out to me like that, I was startled. Startled at the fact that it can talk.

"No, it's fine," I say. "Go back to keeping an eye out."

"Yes, my lord." Flipping its head back upright like a spring-loaded doll and pressing its right hand against the left side of its chest near its heart in a Spada-style salute, Zwei returns to stand in line with Ein and Drei, who are standing at attention.

At present, Lily has only summoned three of them, but this is the limit for this narrow Dungeon corridor.

“Sorry, Kurono, they’re not smart enough to be able to ‘read the mood’ yet,” says Lily, acting adultlike as she apologizes for her subordinate’s failure.

Of course, I’m not going to blame her or anything. “No, they’re functioning just fine as they are,” I tell her. “They’re bringing the enemies down properly in one hit, too.”

In the darkness of the corridor ahead, where the light of Lily’s luminescence and Fiona’s Torch doesn’t reach, at a distance that I wouldn’t be able to see without my exceptional night vision, there is a Skeleton Soldier lying on the ground with its head blown clean off. This is the result of the shot that interrupted my words earlier.

With this quest, we’re testing the performance of these Living Dead and, by making them use rifles, we’re also testing out the guns’ endurance in real combat.

The prototype rifle that Will used in Iskia did jam, and Simon was enthusiastic about refining the rifles to perfection.

Thus, all nine of the Living Dead are equipped with the improved version of the rifle. The prototype that Will had purchased and paid for in installments was a hundred thousand Klans; the price of nine rifles is enough to send half of my fight money from the Curse Carnival flying away, but the manufacturing costs are scheduled to decrease from now on.

All of the parts have been made at the Stratos Smithing Workshop up until now, but with this opportunity – in other words, with the great sum of money I have acquired thanks to the fight money and the reward for the battle of Iskia – work has begun on securing a way to mass-produce them.

It’s not enough to build a factory yet, but Regin-san talked to Mordred and it’s been decided that he’s going to borrow part of a large smithing factory owned by a company to manufacture the parts. Mordred himself has apparently shown interest in the weapons called guns, which can produce a certain amount of killing power without needing mana, so if the rifles can be perfected, full-blown mass-production could become a possibility later.

Of course, the development and production of other arms are already in the works. I wonder if machine guns are next. Simon was pretty fired up and had

already started on the blueprints, too, saying something about being able to lay waste to monsters the next time a huge army of them appears.

“Alright, let’s press on,” I say. “We’ll defeat the Lich and clear the quest within the day.”

“Yes,” says Fiona in a monotonous voice.

“Yeah!” Lily yells, full of spirit.

Her three servants repeat her, “Yeah!” as a war cry, raising their fists into the air. Things have gotten pretty lively for the Element Masters.

And so, we press on through another of the corridors that we’ve become completely accustomed to seeing during the past month. We let the three servants stand at the front to deal with the small fry. Lily is in the middle, giving orders and support to the servants. Fiona and I are serving as the rear guard.

The only thing we need to be wary of is an Undead monster attack. Things are quite easy because there aren’t any traps in this Dungeon. That’s why this Dungeon, the Revival Catacombs, is normally Rank 3 when a monster like a Lich hasn’t appeared.

“By the way, Kurono-san, isn’t it almost lunchtime?” Fiona asks suddenly.

She is not wearing the white one-piece dress that I gave to her as a present, but her trademark adventurer equipment, the witch’s robe. She looks incredibly surreal with her beautiful white face illuminated by the dim light of her Torch, but that is put to waste by the small sound of her stomach’s growls acting as background music.

But I can’t make fun of the demands of Fiona’s stomach. And I’m starting to feel quite hungry myself.

Thanks to the relatively accurate biological clock I gained through the remodeling experiments as well as the sensation from the rather unreliable stomach-clock*, I can tell that it is past midday.

TLN*: In Japanese, this is another term for “internal clock”, so this is something of a pun.

I’m reliant on my body’s senses because we can’t see the sky in an

underground Dungeon like this, so it's difficult to tell how fast time is flowing. I suppose I'll buy a watch with the reward money from this quest once we return to Spada.

"You're right," I say. "I suppose it's a good idea to have a meal before we charge into the Lich's chamber – ah, Fiona, they're coming from behind us."

My ears pick up the sound of faint footsteps. My skin feels the presence of mana. And my intuition has been set off, too. Having a sharp sense for approaching enemies without relying on vision is an important ability for adventurers. When it comes to searching for and detecting enemies through bodily senses alone, I'm the sharpest in the party.

"According to the map, it seems that there is a small room up ahead, perfect to stop and rest at," says Fiona.

"What? I said enemies are –"

"– Ignis Blast."

My entire vision is instantly filled with crimson. With a thunderous roar, a storm of whirling heat sweeps down the narrow corridor without leaving any gaps to escape through, as if licking the walls.

In other words, Fiona has turned around and waved her wand, releasing an offensive spell.

The Skeletons that approached in single-file in this narrow corridor have probably been annihilated by this merciless, wide-area flame attack.

Now that the flames have died down, I can't feel their presence anymore.

"Let us hurry and keep going, Kurono-san."

That's not cool, Fiona, even if you are wearing an elegant expression. It's way too easy to see your ulterior motive of satisfying your hunger.

But still, Fiona's magic is as flashy as usual. Even though I have three divine protections of the Demon King, I'm feeling a slight inferiority complex... No, leaving that aside, the thing I should pay attention to is the wand that she waved.

It's the Custom Fireball that she has been using up until now, but it was born

anew with our most recent visit to the Stratos Smithing Workshop.

Its name is now Spitfire.

Its design hasn't changed much, but the notable difference is that there is a large, ruby-like gem attached to the tip. Unlike the Queen Beryl and the Wrath-pun's Fist of Wrath, it's an artificially-made magic stone of flames that isn't rare as far as parts for staffs and wands go, but its performance is apparently incredible.

Fiona used the high-quality flame-element wand that she fortunately happened to acquire during her training in Avalon, called the Ruby Bullet, as custom parts.

In other words, the Ruby Bullet's highly-specialized flame-attribute abilities have been added to the already-exceptional performance of the Custom Fireball. Put simply, the Ignis Sagita that Fiona has been able to fire like a machine

gun can now be fired as three-way split-shots; her casting performance has tripled.

If this thing releases its flames, there's no doubt that its power to annihilate enemies overshadows my Gatling Burst. Not good, my sense of self-worth as a black magic user is steadily dwindling...

As I admire Fiona's abilities and feel depressed about my own, Lily suddenly raises her voice as if in celebration.

"Ah, Kurono, I found the 'boss chamber!'"

The 'boss chamber' she speaks of is the chamber with the boss in it; in other words, it's the deepest part of the Dungeon.

Incidentally, the term 'boss chamber' isn't adventurer slang, but something I let slip because I'm a Japanese person who still can't get the RPG image out of my mind and now, Lily's started copying the term. Well, it's easy to understand so it doesn't matter, but it might be a little embarrassing if other adventurers were to hear it.

"Yeah, this is definitely the boss chamber," I say. "I feel the presence of a

really murderous ambush.”

There’s a small tunnel at the end of the narrow corridor, and deep inside that tunnel, there’s an enormous set of heavy double doors. Ein and Zwei are already standing on either side of it; we’re completely ready to throw the doors open.

“It looks like they’ve strengthened their defenses with numbers. I guess we’ll have you summon all of your servants and make them go in first,” I tell Lily.

I’m sure the enemies have no intention of hiding, either. The doors are heavy, but I’m sure you wouldn’t need my sharp senses to feel the presence of countless enemies crawling about behind them. Well, their groaning is audible as well. The heavy, rough, nasal breathing is no doubt that of Undead Minotaurs.

“Yeah!” says Lily. “Well then, I’m going in with everything I have, okay? Muh, everyone, go!”

She shouts a solemn incantation that is the complete opposite of her adorable appearance, summoning the six servants stored in her Dimension of light.

Giants wearing the same black surcoats and metal masks appear simultaneously from the magic circle that has been drawn in the empty darkness.

“Kurono-san, it seems that everyone is preparing to charge in right now, but, umm, what about lunch?” asks Fiona.

“Well, we’ve found the boss chamber, so let’s eat after we defeat the Lich,” I say.

Please stop making that sad face, Fiona. I feel like I should yield to her silent pressure, but I’ll resist. I’m sure our enemies are ready and waiting on the other side, too.

“If things go as planned, it won’t even take ten minutes. Just hold out a little longer,” I say.

“Very well. Let us finish this as quickly as possible,” says Fiona.

Alright. Now that I've convinced the hungry witch, it's time for the real challenge.

“– Order, Select, ‘Bad Standard.’” Lily, who has finished transforming into her juvenile form in order to go all-out against the Lich, gives these commands to her servants.

TLN: This is in katakana furigana over kanji, which reads something like “Open, arms exchange, evil spirit clothing.” Obviously, I have no clue what this is supposed to mean.

The nine servants standing in a row in front of Lily put their improved-version rifles onto their backs and draw their other weapons. They're all different; none of them are the same.

Ein is holding a longsword. Zwei, a dagger. Drei, a rapier. Vier, a scimitar. Fünf, a tomahawk. Sechs, a battleaxe. Sieben, a spear. Acht, a halberd. Neun, a trident.

However, their weapons have something in common.

“Hmm, having all nine of them equipped with cursed weapons does make me a little uneasy,” says Lily with a slightly troubled expression on her face. As she says, all of the servants' weapons are cursed weapons.

‘Bad Standard’ is, in short, the Nameless Nine that I have let her nine servants borrow.

I've used Eternity on the Blackening that lowers the effects of the curses, but the effects haven't been reduced to zero. If the servants' wills weaken, they'll be taken over by madness in the blink of an eye.

The curses' wills do not treat the Living Dead that hold the weapons, or the spell formula that controls their minds, as exceptions. From what I've heard, Safi had been using the Wrath-pun as a servant in the Iskia Hills after turning it into an Undead, but the Sloth-gil was able to quickly take complete control over it with a parasite. Serves her right – isn't what I want to say. My point is, the fact that a servant moves on command just means that there's plenty of possibility that control over them can be taken away.

However, Lily is only connected to them telepathically, so their effects won't

influence her. I don't know whether that would be true if one of the servants was using the Absolute Grudge Hatchet 'Neck Cutter', but at the very least, it is certain that the Nameless won't be a problem for her.

The fact that Lily, the caster, can completely control the spell formulas that the curses are trying to take over, means that it is possible to have her servants use them.

Also, for Necromancers, having control that cannot be defeated by curses or creating perfect control spell formulas drastically reduces the risk of encountering the greatest danger, the danger of having one's servants 'stolen' by something else. Firm control equals reliable servants.

On top of that, there are benefits to having the servants being able to use the cursed weapons. Simply put, it doesn't need to be said that the cursed weapons make the servants strong.

I can make the servants return the weapons to me if I need them, but, well, there's no problem in just lending them out while we clear this Dungeon.

Lily produces a tennis-ball-sized diamond from somewhere. "I suppose I should use this just in case – obey my command, Diamond Heaven."

The moment the servants gripped the cursed weapons, the red light glowing through the circular eye-holes of their metal masks grew brighter. This must be Lily's way of dealing with that.

The faint white light coming from the jewel strongly captivates people's hearts.

As I have lower-middle-class like thoughts such as wondering just how much it would sell for, Lily is purely using this diamond as a Magic Item – no, as an Artifact.

Apparently, this Diamond Heaven holds the power to apply the Domination Status Effect to its targets. It's quite risky to hold onto, since misusing it would warrant being arrested instantly.

According to Lily, the true value of this item is its ability that grants better telepathy access, allowing free control over the Homunculi. Thanks to this, the Homunculi have the strength, independence and learning ability needed to

throw all of them into battle at once.

Well, I'm ignorant when it comes to modern magic, so I can't understand a thing about Necromancy, which is even more advanced. I feel pathetic for not being able to think anything of it other than having a vague feeling that Lily is amazing.

"Okay, now everything is set," says Lily, turning around with a bright smile. "Now then, Kurono, I'm ready when you are."

The nine servants are standing silently behind her in front of the door, weapons at the ready. It's just like an ojou-sama being surrounded by her bodyguards – no, that's not right, Lily is –

"You give the signal, Lily," I say. "We'll leave the small-fry to you and head straight for the Lich. That's all there is to it."

"Understood," says Lily. She turns back to her servants. "You heard that, didn't you, servants? Your lord has requested that you do not let even a single small-fry approach him. Please don't disappoint me."

"Yes, My Princess!" Nine voices echo loudly in response to her words.

Indeed, it is fitting to call Lily a princess. The way she gives orders is so masterful it's terrifying.

"– Charge."

Thus, the nine knights charge into the large boss chamber to rise to their princess's expectations.

I take a step forward as well so that I don't fall behind. This is where the real deal begins.

"... This is where we, the Element Masters, test ourselves to see whether we have the power to kill an Apostle."

Chapter 377: The Lich, king of the Undead, appears!

At the bottom floor of the Rank 3 Dungeon known as the Revival Catacombs, there is a large, circular space resembling Spada's Grand Coliseum.

Both of them are made of unrefined stone, but there are conspicuous, distasteful decorations all over this place. Pillars that are twisted like Baphomet's horns, the iron fences with rusty, thorn-like points, the ominous Gargoyles, which are statues that are shaped like chimeras, and the list goes on... The melancholic atmosphere is extraordinary.

The one waiting in this place is the king that currently rules the Undead monsters of this Dungeon, the Lich.

His appearance is the same as a normal Skeleton, but the dark mana hidden within his body, no, within his evil soul, is remarkably greater than other Undead monsters. The reason Liches are generally the type of monsters that use magic to fight is because that is the best way to make use of their abundant supply of mana.

The Lich that was recently born in the Revival Catacombs is no exception; he is a mage-class monster that is holding a staff made of dull gold.

He is wearing a rusty crown, along with a robe and cape that are stained dark with blood. There is purple, flickering light burning in the eye sockets of his skull. His appearance is exactly the same as the illustrations published in the Guild's monster list.

The appearance of Liches is well-known throughout the world and there are never any exceptions; it is simple for anyone to imagine what they look like – however, this makes no difference to the fact that Liches are monsters powerful enough to be crowned with the Rank 5 title.

Such a Lich is currently welcoming a certain party of adventurers with tremendous anger.

"There's no mistake that this is the Lich, huh," says a voice.

The ones that stand arrogantly before him, a king of death, is a man in black

clothes, accompanied by a Fairy and a witch who serve him.

These three scattered the Undead monster army that was the final line of defense guarding this place with ease, as if they were walking through an unoccupied wasteland.

There were well over a hundred Skeleton Soldiers at the core of the army, with several dozen heavy monsters such as Minotaur Zombies and Cyclops Zombies as well. There were even the Lich's Elite Zombies, which had been made by making Zombies out of the adventurers who had stepped foot into this place, capable of fighting with the same class and strength as they possessed while they were alive.

The Undead army was strong enough that it would be able to fight against even the Knights' Order if they were to step foot in this place – or at least, it was supposed to be, but it seems that it was of no use in stopping these three.

Even now, the man is secretly giving orders to attack from behind – no, judging from the faint signs of telepathy, the one giving direct orders is likely the Fairy. In any case, the forceful way that the nine warriors who obey her are fighting prevents the Undead monsters from approaching.

The Lich's irritation further increases with how disappointing his subordinates show themselves to be.

However, thinks the Lich, who possesses a high level of intelligence, if I defeat this party of adventurers and add them to my subordinates as Undead, I will gain fighting strength that will render the losses I have suffered in this battle trivial. Although I am in trouble, this is a chance for me.

Giving a dry laugh with his teeth clattering, the Lich raises his staff.

These three are strong, but not as powerful as he is. For the Lich, it is merely irritating that he has to take action himself. But that is all it is.

Once the Lich releases his prided, powerful spell of darkness, Death Force Blast, that will be the end.

“– تدمير تبادل لاطلاق النار تبادل لاطلاق النار الظلام انتشار الظلام الأسود”

Is it foolish for the mage-class Lich to begin reciting an incantation right in

front of the enemy on his own? No, adventurers who have come this far would understand. They would understand that the Lich has a plan to fight and win, even if there is no frontline to defend the caster.

There are multiple lines of defense, not just one. They are not functions of the Dungeon, but traps that he has set up himself, among other things. Preparations to make a counter-attack are perfect.

This is a Dungeon, the Lich's castle. The terrain advantage is his, and he has the brains to make use of it.

There is not even the smallest chance of defeat – so the Lich thinks, as he hears words that are perfectly normal to hear from an adventurer party, the order to attack. This is the last thing that he hears.

“Let's go, Lily, Fiona – Formation Anti-Cross.”

“Welcome back, Kurono-kun. Congratulations on clearing the quest,” says Erina with a wonderful smile, congratulating me on my return and my success with the quest at the Adventurers' Guild headquarters.

If it were an ordinary receptionist, these words would be a fixed phrase with no value, but hearing them from Erina, my friend, fills my heart with emotion.

Though according to Fiona, the moment I feel that emotion, I've already been fooled.

“Thanks,” I say. “I know it's early, but I want you to show me the next quest.”

Leaving aside whether or not I'll accept it right away, I want to set my eyes on an objective ahead of time.

Looking back on it, the Lich extermination was a great success. In fact, it wasn't a tough battle at all; it was a one-sided game for us. I think it took less than five minutes to go from the beginning of battle to extracting the Imitation Heart, which had turned into a high-density mana crystal, from the Lich's collapsed skull.

The Demon King Mia, the Fairy Queen Iris and the Black Witch Endymion. With the divine protections of these three, the formation Anti-Cross will live up to its name and bury the Apostles, the pawns of god – or at least, it's supposed

to.

I've fought the Seventh Apostle Sarial twice, but she was constantly going easy on me, and I've only seen a single somewhat-serious attack from the Eighth Apostle Ai. It's still difficult to tell just how powerful an Apostle using their full strength will be.

But even so, I've finally acquired enough power that I am able to truly feel that I have a chance of beating them. I've made great progress.

In any case, if I can manifest power strong enough to kill an Apostle, there is no way I wouldn't be able to defeat a Lich, one of the weaker among Rank 5 monsters.

But the coordinative strategy that we invented to use against the Apostles; no, it might be more appropriate to call it a battle formation. In any case, this Anti-Cross – it's questionable as to whether we are using it to its full potential. We calculated that the maximum duration we could use the formation was fifteen minutes, but when we actually used it, it was so unstable that I don't know whether it could have held for ten.

I haven't mastered the use of my new divine protections, and neither have Lily or Fiona. This is the simple, yet fundamental problem.

If there had been two Liches, things might have been a little dangerous. After using the formation, all of us are drained of almost every bit of mana we have, so we become incapacitated afterwards.

The reason we're using Lily's servants is because we anticipated this happening. Their true role on the battlefield is to protect the three of us when we're no longer capable of fighting. After seeing their performance during this quest, I feel at ease knowing that they can fulfil this role just fine.

It's quite remarkable that they have the fighting strength and coordination to overwhelm Skeleton Soldiers and even hold their own against large enemies like Minotaur Zombies. If their abilities were to be converted into an adventurer Rank, even if you were to give them the lowest possible estimate, they would be at least Rank 3. Once they gain some more experience in battle and better equipment, they can probably become equivalent to Rank 4.

Is it them that are amazing for having such great hidden specs, or is it Lily that's amazing?

Either way, we currently still need more training. We need to find our next practice opponents quickly.

"Say, Kurono-kun," Erina says suddenly as I skim through the stack of request forms with details of Rank 5 quests written on them.

I wonder if there is a particular quest that she wants to recommend.

"Shall we go on a date?"

"... I'm sorry?"

I reflexively look up from the request form for the extermination of a pair of Salamanders. I've received a crazy proposal. However, my eyes see the smile of a charming, beautiful Elf. She's smiling, but her eyes look quite serious.

"That witch interfered last time; if we don't make an arrangement soon, you'll go away on your quest and won't be back for a while, right?" Erina says.

"No, that's, well, true, but..." I mumble. "A date, you say, but it's not like I'm really dating you now, right?"

"Jeez, your way of thinking is too rigid, Kurono-kun," she says. "When a man and woman of a certain age enjoy themselves with just the two of them, that's called a date. Even if the people going on the date cover it up by saying that they're friends."

Isn't it Erina whose way of thinking is too rigid? Is this the standard definition in Spada?

No, but still, she is inviting me on a date, and I'm certainly not refusing her right now. Which means, in other words, she's clearly acknowledging me as a member of the opposite sex and –

"Is this a honey trap?*" I ask.

TLN*: Kurono uses the polite "ですか/desuka?" at the end of this sentence. Incidentally, if you don't know, a "honey trap" is where a woman seduces a man to gain information, *etc.*

“Is that what you’re calling it?! And don’t go back to using formal language!” Erina shouts.

I suppose I find it really concerning when someone makes a move on me in such a straight manner, if you know what I mean.

“Ah, sorry,” I say. “But leaving aside whether it can be called a date, I don’t mind going to eat or enjoy ourselves or go out somewhere with just the two of us.”

“Eh, no way, really?!”

“Yeah, we’re friends, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll start off as friends!”

It’s not really a honey trap, is it...? Anyway, I’m not against strengthening my personal friendship with Erina. Fiona is probably going to complain, but it should be fine as long as I’m prepared to make sure that I’m not being made use of one-sidedly. I’m sure it’ll be fine.

“So then, when are you free?” Erina asks. “I don’t mind going right now, you know?”

What about your work, I wonder. But I suppose one of the Guild’s objectives is to have friendly relations with Rank 5 adventurers. I suppose all kinds of things will be allowed if this reason is given.

One might think that it’s quite a fun system for Erina to be able to go and enjoy herself publicly while working, but if you think about it carefully, it’s easy to imagine her being forced to entertain adventurers that she doesn’t even like.

Is she just working to make me happy...? I’m not entirely without suspicion.

“Maybe not right now,” I reply. “I have to prepare for the next quest, and I have all kinds of other plans –”

Going and enjoying myself is all well and good, but I can’t do nothing but relax. Even if I have gained a good chance of success in defeating the Apostles, I definitely can’t let my guard down.

And just as I wonder what I should do, I casually flip the next request form near my hand –

“... Sorry, Erina. Sorry to say this so suddenly, but can the date wait until after my next quest is finished?”

“Eh, why?!”

Rather than being angry at me for changing my mind, Erina is wearing a sad expression. It pains my heart, but I can't compromise. There are now circumstances that make me unable to compromise.

“I have to finish this quest as soon possible, no matter what,” I say, handing Erina a single request form. In other words, I'm accepting this quest.

Quest – Lust-Rose extermination

Reward: 20,000,000 Klans

Time limit: Until the arrival of spring

Contractor: Guild Master Jimmy of the Asbel Village's Adventurers' Guild

Contents of request: A Lust-Rose nest has opened in the Asbel Mountain Range this year. The Lust-Rose typically hides in its cavern and waits for its prey to rush inside. Because of this behavior, it does not cause any harm as long as nobody approaches it, so it is not a priority extermination target.

However, it was discovered thirty years ago and numerous people have since challenged it and never returned, so I wish for its extermination this year from the bottom of my heart.

“The Lust-Rose extermination?” says Erina, reading the form. “It's a monster that I've never heard of. Are you really in that much of a hurry to defeat it?”

There is nothing that could possibly be more important except dealing with the Crusader army if it begins its advance.

“Yeah, I have to do this no matter what,” I say. “Please.”

“I see. It's a pity, but I'll wait. Come back as soon as you can, okay?”

And so, I face my fourth trial that holds the title of Lust.

Chapter 378: The Greed

Unable to stand the thought of someone taking the quest before me, I accepted the Lust-Rose extermination quest and headed straight for the Stratos Smithing Workshop.

I rejected Erina's date; I don't have time to be taking it slow and enjoying myself. We have to hurry and prepare for the quest and then make our departure.

Of course, even if I didn't have this sense of purpose, it doesn't change the fact that I've been visiting this place frequently. Neck Cutter and Hitsugi were returned to me right after their maintenance was finished. If they hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to exterminate the Lich.

The result of the maintenance was superb; the items felt even more comfortable in my hands than before, and it felt like everyone became prettier. Especially Hitsugi.

"My prided black hair has become even more beautiful, the kind of hair that my motekawa* Goshujin-sama loves!" She shouted these words of questionable meaning in a satisfied tone. Inside my head. It was really loud.

TLN*: This seems to be a combination of もてる/moteru, which is "to be popular with members of the opposite sex," and 可愛い/kawaii, which means "cute."

But for some reason, the Hungry Wolf Blade 'Evil Eater' remained the same. There is a large fissure running down the belly of the blade from when it blocked the Greed-Gore's iron sand greatsword, so this guy was the one that needed repairs the most.

I thought that I was going to be told that nothing could be done about it, but Regin-san gave me a completely different explanation, saying that "it is better this way." With quite a lot of confidence, too.

Well, he did assure me that its function as a sword has been restored without problem, so I did just take it with me, but... I'd still feel a little uneasy about

using it in a critical situation.

Now then, all of these handheld items were returned to me long ago, but maintenance wasn't the only thing I requested at the Stratos Smithing Workshop.

Indeed, I have asked Regin-san to manufacture a new weapon for me.

Now I'm knocking on the door of the workshop with my heart beating fast in anticipation of what he could have made for me.

"Good day, Kurono-san," Regin-san says as he opens the door and welcomes me inside. "Congratulations on your success in exterminating the Lich. I have completed your weapon while you were away." He's wearing a friendly smile that I wouldn't expect from a Dwarf craftsman. But he's not an over-friendly salesman, so he brushes aside the unnecessary small-talk and goes straight to the matter at hand. "I will bring it here now, so please wait a moment."

Excited, I wait quietly with a cup of tea prepared by Regin-san's wife in my hand.

I've invested an incredible amount of materials and money into this, so my sense of anticipation is on another level from when I had the Wrath-Pun's arm made.

Before long, Regin-san reappears from the depths of the workshop, pushing a cart with rattling wheels. "Thank you for waiting," he says. "I have prepared a 'gun' that you can use in place of a staff, Kurono-san."

It's more of a cannon than a gun. No, to be more precise, it's a Gatling gun.

With its characteristic six barrels positioned in a circular bundle, it can't be called anything else.

I have a vague recollection of telling Simon about the structure and shape of a Gatling gun, but... to think that the concept would be implemented in this form. Simon's planning skills and Regin-san's manufacturing skills are things to be feared.

"Well, it seems that you already feel this, Kurono-san, but this is, let us say, more of a cannon than a gun," Regin-san says. "It is as if I have made a ballista

when you asked for a bow. But I believed that you would be able to master the use of this weapon.”

From the six muzzles to the rectangular, engine-like body, the weapon is easily over a meter long. Seeing the beautiful, shining jet-black metal, I can guess that the whole thing is made of the Greed-Gore’s iron sand.

It’s unreasonable to expect a single person to wield this huge mass of steel. These things are supposed to be equipped on fighter planes and helicopters.

“How heavy is it?” I ask.

“It is around one hundred kilograms,” Regin-san replies. “I did make it as light as I could.”

“That’s fine.”

I grip the handle and feel the cold metal in my hand. At the same time, I feel its weight in my arm. But I can handle this with one hand.

I easily lift the hundred-kilogram cannon with my right hand.

“As I expected,” Regin-san says. “Though us Dwarves are proud of our strength, I cannot lift it with one hand.”

“Despite my appearance, I *am* a Rank 5 adventurer,” I say.

“I see. This must be the power of a berserker.”

“Please don’t say that.”

With a bitter smile, I close my left hand around the foregrip at the base of the barrels and raise it as if I’m embracing it. Yeah, holding it with both hands makes it quite stable. I can easily swing this stupidly heavy Gatling gun like a macho Cyborg hero in Hollywood action movies.

Come to think of it, when I made the request, Regin-san took measurements of my body, so this weapon might have been made with the length of my arms and my physique in mind. What incredible attention to detail.

Incidentally, my height was measured to be one hundred and ninety centimeters. Hmm, it seems that I’ve grown taller after all. I’m still only seventeen; I’m in my growth period.

“What does this weapon use for ammunition?” I ask.

“Theoretically, it should be able to fire a maximum of two thousand rounds per minute, but I cannot create such large amounts of ammunition, so you will have to use your Bullet Arts, Kurono-san,” Regin-san explains.

I see. In other words, I’m supposed to use Gatling Burst with this. I never imagined that I would be able to use Gatling Burst with an actual Gatling gun.

“Of course, there are many spell formulas that assist in the purification of the projectiles,” Regin-san continues. “When the trigger is pulled, the engraved magic circles join together and activate. As a reference, I used the function of the Black Ballista Replica that you said that you once used, so even your black magic should work perfectly with it.”

What a nostalgic name. Now that I think about it, I haven’t used a proper staff-like staff ever since then.

Maybe if I bought a staff as soon as I came to Spada, any staff at all, maybe I would have become a famous black magic user...

No, let’s stop. Even if I regret it now, it’s too late.

In any case, let’s cheer up and be happy about the fact that I’ve finally acquired a weapon suited to using black magic.

“I guess I can’t give it a test fire now, can I?” I say.

“No, my store would be annihilated if you were to fire it,” Regin-san says.

Alright, I need to hold myself back from pulling the trigger until I reach the academy’s training grounds.

“Other than improved rate of fire and power, are there any new effects?” I ask.

“Its appearance is different, but please consider its fundamental structure to be the same as the prototype rifle,” Regin-san says.

By the way, about that prototype rifle, it’s actually started to show its age as well, so it’s also currently in for repair.

Well, I was basically firing it non-stop at the monster army surrounding the

Iskia Fortress until I managed to push through to the fortress. In fact, I should be grateful that the barrel held out so well. If I was unfortunate enough to have a misfire occur during the last shot I used to finish off the Sloth-Gil, I might have been defeated.

It worked hard for me, so, of course, it's going to be repaired and returned to me. But anyway, we're talking about the Gatling gun at the moment.

"However, in place of the magic stone that a staff requires, I have incorporated the Sloth-Gil's skull into this weapon, so it is possible to utilize powerful lightning element abilities," Regin-san says.

"Skull?" I repeat.

"Yes, it is in here."

Regin-san points to the main body of the gun that connects the handle to the barrels. At first, I thought the reason it looks like a rough, rectangular engine is because it was imitating the crappy illustration and explanation that I gave Simon, but... I see, so that thing's head is inside this.

I listen on to learn that the inside of its mouth is the gun chamber, so this is where the pseudo-Fullmetal Jacket rounds that I create are summoned and loaded.

"A lightning-element spell formula has been incorporated in order to accelerate the bullets," Regin-san continues. "Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the Sloth-Gil itself possesses the power of the lightning element, which naturally adds to the speed of the bullets."

Huh, then does that mean that this is like a natural railgun?

"Do you know how the lightning element accelerates the fired bullets?" I ask.

"I am not a mage, so I do not have the faintest idea as to what principles are at work," Regin-san replies. "However, it is unmistakably a well-established spell formula, so I can assure you that its effect is certainly working properly."

Well, I don't know the details of the principles behind how a railgun works, either. The Gatling gun's mechanism probably uses electromagnetic induction like real railguns, and even if it's just some mysterious magical principle that

makes the bullets faster by adding the lightning element, there's no problem as long as it make the fired bullets travel faster.

“Well, this trivial effect is not the main reason I have incorporated this,” Regin-san says. “Could you please put the gun down, Kurono-san?”

I put the Gatling gun on the ground as I'm asked.

Regin-san bends over and I see him tinkering with something, and then the barrels detach from the weapon's body with a heavy, clunking noise.

It's not that it's broken; I certainly swung the weapon lightly while holding onto the barrels earlier. They either come off with the press of a button, or it's some kind of magic. I'm curious about it, but I wait quietly without interrupting with a question.

Regin-san takes a different barrel from the cart that he probably prepared in advance, and joins it with the Gatling gun's body to give it a new appearance.

The result is an anti-materiel rifle – no, it's got a different barrel, but it's still a large cannon.

“If you switch to this barrel, you can fire a Plasma Breath,” Regin-san says.

“I can fire that?!”

“Of course, it is inferior to the original, but even so, it produces a power that even the advanced offensive spell Line Force Sagita cannot compare to it.”

Wow, that's seriously amazing! I'm excited on the inside, but I quietly listen to Regin-san's continued explanation.

“However, it is a powerful attack, so it requires you to charge it yourself to a certain extent. That is, you should be able to use a pseudo-lightning element with your black magic. There is no problem with this, is there?”

“No, none at all.”

It's not like I can imitate all kinds of lightning-element spells as if I'm a skilled Thunder Mage, but if I just need to pour some mana in, I can use as much as is needed. I'm confident in my stamina, and pretty confident in my mana as well.

“That is excellent,” Regin-san says. “Even if you simply charge it with

lightning-element mana, the Sloth-Gil's skull will amplify the electrical energy and fire with considerable power, but –" Regin-san takes another item from the cart. It's a magical cart that can produce anything. "If these bullets are not used, it will not produce anything powerful enough to be called a Plasma Breath."

He hands me something that has a rather unusual shape for a bullet. It has two twisting parts starting from a sharp, claw-like tip; it's not exactly smooth and aerodynamically-shaped for reducing air resistance.

It seems that the whole thing is coated in the Greed-Gore's iron sand, forming a double-helix from the tip with gaps in between the two parts, and there is an ominous purple light leaking through those gaps.

"These bullets have been made with the bones of the Sloth-Gil's fingers," Regin-san explains.

I see, that makes sense. If I recall, it had four long, thin fingers on each hand, so that's eight in total with both hands. So that means –

"Two of the fingers will be used as planned, so there will be six Plasma Breath bullets," Regin-san says. "However, I have only been able to prepare this one bullet so far, so if you say that you wish for me to make another of *those* items –"

"No, I won't need a third," I say. "They probably won't let me fire it, after all."

In any case, this means that there is an ammunition limit for firing Plasma Breaths. If I only have six shots, I'm a little reluctant to fire a test shot... so for now, I'll limit my testing to firing it by charging it with my mana.

"My apologies, but when you fire the Plasma Breath, the gun barrel will likely be pushed to its limits with a single shot," Regin-san says. "If you fire a second in quick succession, there is no doubt that the barrel will liquefy. In the worst-case scenario, it could even misfire."

In other words, I have to keep the barrel cool if I want to use it safely.

I suppose the overheating of the barrel is a problem that can't be avoided with firearms. Even in the battle of Alzas, our crossfire was interrupted because of this problem.

I'm sure Simon is experimenting with how to solve the machine gun's cooling problems right about now.

"By the way, Kurono-san, this weapon does not yet have a name, so could you take this opportunity to give it one?" Regin-san asks with a bitter smile, knowing that he doesn't have a sense for naming things.

Hmph, if that's the case, leave it to the former literature club member.

Hmm, I wonder what would be good here. A long string of unintelligible kanji would be difficult to pronounce, and it's not a cursed weapon, so something simple –

"Well then, I'll name it 'The Greed.'"

Chapter 379: Number one fan

On the way back from the workshop after receiving my new weapon, I overhear this conversation.

“It’s Wing Road after all; they’ve gotten really serious lately and they’ve been doing Rank 5 quests.”

“Yeah, with the rampaging Ancient Golem, the Elixir recovery and the suppression of the Slime fever, that’s three in a month. But on the other hand, the Element Masters are still in the middle of the Lich extermination.”

“Wing Road are on a different level; they are true elites.”

“Right? I was scared of the Berserker during the parade, but I’m sure that’s because he was using some kind of pressuring spell.”

We’ve already cleared the Lich extermination. We took so long because we were busy experimenting, and me scaring everyone was completely natural. I have all kinds of explanations to give, but I’m not going to go out of my way to complain.

We Element Masters performed brilliantly during the battle of Iskia and made a sudden Rank 5 debut. Along with setting the fastest Rank-up record with a time of three months, we’ve drawn attention as the rivals of Wing Road, the party that has been the youngest and most active up until now.

However, just as the rumors say, we, the newer party, haven’t reported the completion of a single quest; our results for the month that has passed since our increase in Rank are poor.

In contrast, Wing Road has been clearing Rank 5 quests one after another, as if to claim back the spotlight that was stolen from them in Iskia.

The difference between us is clear. This is even truer for the townspeople, who know of nothing other than the results of quests. It seems that this month has been plenty of time for the rumors that Wing Road is a step above us to start spreading.

I-it’s not like I’m upset about or anything, you know...

“U-umm...”

That’s right, it’s not like we want to stand out. We have our sights on our objective of defeating the Apostles and we’re progressing steadily towards it, so we’re fine with it. Isn’t everything going well? Just what could we possibly be dissatisfied about – ah, well, there’s also a vain part of me that wishes that we could do some work that I could brag about to Nell.

“Umm, excuse me!”

“UOH?!”

I’m completely surprised by the voice that suddenly calls out to me. I was so totally immersed in my thoughts that I didn’t notice being approached.

As I hastily turn around, I see a female student so small that her head just manages to enter the bottom of my vision.

“Uu... U-umm... You are the Nightmare Berserker, Kurono-san, aren’t you?” she asks, looking like she might cry at any moment.

Uwah, I don’t want to answer. I don’t want to puff out my chest and say, “Yes, I am the Nightmare Berserker.” But I can’t just not answer, I suppose.

“Yes, I’m Kurono.”

I ran away a little. Even though ‘Nightmare Berserker’ has become my formal class title, what’s embarrassing is still embarrassing.

Anyway, let’s set aside my trivial embarrassment. The problem at hand is this girl who has called out to me with tears in her eyes.

Judging from the close-fitting black uniform blazer that she’s wearing, there’s no doubt that she’s an academy student. Incidentally, it seems that I’ve returned to the academy without even realizing. I’m a short distance past the gate.

“What did you want with me?” I ask.

She has brown, almost-black hair in a bob cut, and tears are swimming in her round, adorable eyes. Combined with her slender, small body, her face somewhat reminds me of a small animal. I have no memory of this face – no, I do. This is a face that I’ve seen somewhere before. I’ve definitely seen it

somewhere before, but I can't remember when or where.

Due to this tantalizing sensation caused by my memory, I've ended up speaking to her quite bluntly.

My sharp ears didn't miss that really, really small scream that escaped her.

What have I done? I've gone and frightened her for no reason...

"Umm, that's... err..."

Tears finally spill over the edges of her eyes. Her small body trembles.

This is bad; my image as a criminal is rapidly increasing in this place. I have a feeling that in another five minutes, Safiel will show up, saying something like, "Get away from that girl, Nightmare Raper."

Still, I'm unable to think of an effective way to overcome this situation. This is where, you know, to stop a small child from being frightened, I have to make eye contact, call out to her gently and pat her head or something... That's no good. I get the feeling that this is an act that would only be allowed for people as handsome as Nero. At the very least, the only one I could successfully perform this on is probably Lily.

In the end, I just stand rigidly on the spot as if I've been petrified, silently waiting for her response. Damn it, I feel even more tense than when I was about to fight the Lich.

"M-my friend... was in Iskia, umm, and... you saved her, Kurono-san, so..."

Her words are intermittent, but I am quickly able to understand what she is doing her utmost to try and tell me.

"Could it be that you've come to thank me?" I ask.

"Yes... Th-thank you!" She expresses her gratitude with a teary voice and her head flies downwards in a bow.

When a girl does this in front of me, I normally can't react in any way other than to be flustered or panicked.

But today, I'm simply happy. I see. This is what saving people is like. I can really feel that sensation again.

“I see. I’m glad I could save your friend.”

I certainly didn’t go to Iskia Fortress because I wanted to be praised. But I can’t help being happy when being thanked.

I felt this when I rescued Jenna and the others from the bandits, but having my efforts rewarded properly is an extraordinarily happy thing.

“Ha, wawa... U-umm, Kurono-san...”

While thinking about how happy I am, I’ve unconsciously started patting the back of the girl’s head that has been presented to me.

“Ah, sorry, I wasn’t thinking,” I say in earnest apology as I quickly remove my hand. Damn it, I got this image that this girl would love having her head patted, so I don’t feel any guilt at all. But no, really, I’m sorry.

“I-it’s not that! Having my head patted by Kurono-san is a-an honor!” she exclaims.

If you tell me that it’s an honor with tears in your eyes, it feels like I’m forcing you to say it.

But still, what is this tight feeling in my chest? An honor... Having her head patted by me is an honor, she says...

“The truth is that I was watching the Curse Carnival! From the front row! Kurono-san, you were very cool! I’m your fan, please give me your autograph!” she goes on, as if to catch me while I’m busy dealing with these indescribable, perplexing emotions.

Now I can’t help but to feel like she should just go ahead and say everything.

“Eh, that tournament, you were watching? Fan... autograph?”

“Yes! Please!” She pulls a student diary from the breast pocket of her uniform and holds it out to me. Along with a pen.

I freeze. I mean, even if you ask for my autograph, what kind of publicity stunt is this supposed to be... No, it’s a fact that I’m a Rank 5 adventurer who has received an award from the king, and I’m a well-known person in Spada now. I’m an authentic famous person.

But I want her to wait a little. Even if I have become famous, whether I can become naturally able to give my autograph away as a gift for people is another matter entirely.

Thinking about it normally, it's hard. Just imagining practicing giving autographs to prepare for the future, preparing a pen-name and coming up with an elaborately-designed signature is embarrassing enough for me to want to bury my face in a pillow and flap my legs.

No, I've never done this. I've definitely never done this. Coming up with a cool name while I was in middle school is as far as I've gone!

"Umm... You won't?" the girl asks, looking like she's going to cry for real this time.

Men are weak to the tears of women. I've never felt this law of nature so strongly as I do right now. Despite how embarrassing it is, my reply is immediate.

"Ah, I don't mind if it's just an autograph," I say.

Now then, I've managed to gracefully take the student diary and pen, which is good, but what am I supposed to write...

"Here you go," I say.

"Thank you very much!" The girl takes her signed student diary with a smile that covers her whole face.

The words 'Nightmare Berserker Kurono' are clearly written on it.

I've gone and done it. This is the second time that I've called myself by my embarrassing title. It really is embarrassing. Damn it, Will, this is the one thing that I resent you for.

"Really, thank you very much. Please do your best from now on as well!" the girl says.

"Yeah, thanks for cheering me on."

Completely oblivious to the complicated feelings in my chest, the girl leaves cheerfully.

She was in tears at first, but she left smiling in the end, so I suppose I can say that this was a good encounter.

But still, having a thankful fan who wanted my autograph, this was a scene that let me experience the charm of ‘fame’ all in one go. Isn’t it possible for me to actually become a popular person – This meeting was so impactful that I might get this delusional idea in my head.

It’s fine. I don’t crave the limelight so much that I would be blinded by a desire for fame. I am completely aware of what is most important here. Fame is secondary or even tertiary.

For now, being immersed in the fluffy feeling of knowing that I have an adorable fan out there is good enough for me.

I didn’t ask for her name or class, but I’ll work hard so I can do better for her if I see her again. May I escort you somewhere, Ojou-san? Something like that.

“... Ah.”

I’ve remembered.

My stupid delusion has unexpectedly produced the answer. Escort, guiding, showing the way.

That’s right, that girl was the female student that I asked for directions to Simon’s dormitory when I first visited the academy. I recover my memories of her being very frightened and me wondering why I called out to female students instead of male ones.

But even she has become able to show me a smile now. I feel strange thinking about that, because it’s like I’ve come a really long way.

In any case, I’ve become used to the refreshing feeling of this wonderful encounter. Good, good. I found the quest for my trial today, too, I’m kind of lucky today – perhaps I shouldn’t have thought this.

The moment the dormitory that I’m returning to enters my sight –
I hear the voices of girls arguing.

“Hmm, this voice is Lily... and Nell, I guess.” I immediately realize that this is a bad combination and let out a small sigh. “... Again, huh.”

Now then, what should I say to mediate peace between them, and what should I tell them? I harden my resolve and press on to the dormitory as I rack my brains.

Note from the author:

Fan-number-one-chan is a minor character that only appeared in Kurono's monologue in chapter 183, "Let's go to school." I wonder how many people remember that paragraph...

Regarding the previous chapter, I apologize for making the explanation of the timing of Kurono receiving his cursed weapons confusing and difficult to understand.

There was a sentence that reads:

"Neck Cutter and Hitsugi were returned to me right after their maintenance was finished. If they hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to exterminate the Lich."

As this sentence suggests, Kurono received all of his cursed weapons before departing to defeat the Lich.

However, the prototype rifle was left for later, and even at present, where he has already received 'The Greed,' the prototype rifle is still undergoing service (magical remodeling).

Chapter 380: The nuisance Fairy

Exactly a month ago, on the 9th of Blue Moon, the day after I went to visit Nell. Just after the bell signalling the end of the day's lessons rang, Nell visited the dormitory. On the same day, she fulfilled my request to teach me magic.

At the time, Lily and I were in the dormitory. Fiona had gone out on a shopping-and-eating trip for the Lich extermination request that we'd accepted.

In any case, this was the first time that Lily and Nell had met each other face-to-face.

"Good day, Kurono-kun. Umm, if I recall, this child is your party member..."

"Yeah, she's Lily. Come on, Lily, say hello –"

"No! Go home!"

The first one to bark is Lily. She lets out intimidating hisses like a Salamander facing an enemy trespassing on its domain. It's cute when she does this in her child form, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a rude way to behave towards a princess that she is meeting for the first time.

"U-umm, Kurono-kun..."

Faced with the fierce hostility of an adorable Fairy-san, Nell is bewildered as to how to cope with the situation.

"You can't come in! You caaaaaaan't!" Lily's voice grew louder.

The Oracle Field surrounds her small body in full force, flickering intermittently.

This is the same shining light that I saw coming from a real Fairy warning me to leave the forest when I first met Lily in the Fairy Garden. Intense flickering is how Fairies threaten others.

"Sorry, Nell, wait a moment," I say.

I hastily scoop up the growling Lily into my arms, close the door in the dormitory's entranceway and make a temporary retreat.

“Oi, Lily, what’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” I quietly ask Lily, who is giving me a reproachful, sullen glare from within my arms.

“Muh, why did that person come to our house! She’s not allowed to meet you! She’s dangerous!”

It seems that Lily’s mind understands things as they were described in the first Element Masters emergency meeting.

Carelessly coming into contact with Nell, who is a member of the royal family = She is a dangerous person that I must not meet. I’m sure Nell looks like a winged monster to the young Lily.

“I’m being careful, but banning me from meeting her is –”

“You caaaan’t!”

Apparently, I can’t. Lily objects as if she’s pressing me to cut my ties with an adulterous partner. Well, I’ve never had a girlfriend before, so I have no experience in cheating on someone.

“Sorry, Lily,” I say. “But I need Nell’s power no matter what.”

“Why?! Is Lily no good?!” Lily reacts in such a way that it feels like a crashing noise is going to follow. Her eyes and mouth are wide open letting me know how shocked she is so clearly that it hurts.

“It’s unfortunate, but you can’t teach me modern magic, can you, Lily?” I point out.

“U-uh... Umm, you know... If you go, ‘faah,’ fire comes out.”

“That’s your Characteristic Ability, isn’t it? I can’t imitate that.”

I feel bad for Lily, whose eyes have now become teary in shock, but this is one problem that nothing can be done about. Lily has been completely reliant on the Characteristic Ability that she possesses; she has not acquired the use of modern magic like a regular mage.

Of course, at this point in time, Lily possesses abilities on the level of a Rank 5 adventurer, and her Characteristic Ability that she spent a long time improving isn’t at all inferior to the proper way of learning magic.

“As I explained before, it’s absolutely necessary for me to learn modern magic so that I can make full use of my divine protections,” I say.

“Uu... Can’t Fiona do it?”

“... As unfortunate as it is, I couldn’t keep up with Fiona’s lessons.”

Being as useless as I am, I still haven’t managed to tell Fiona that it’s impossible to understand her explanations through onomatopoeic sounds alone. Ah, the second Element Masters emergency meeting will probably be held today, so I should prepare myself.

“That’s how it is, so I have no choice but to ask Nell to teach me,” I say. “I know that you’re wary of her, but please be understanding here.”

“... Alright. I’ll listen to you, Kurono.” Lily seems reluctant, but she folds.

As expected of Lily, what an obedient child she is.

And so, Nell coming to teaching me magic was formally approved, but –

I sigh. “... Again, huh.”

I’m currently looking at Lily, who is using her sparkling Fairy-style intimidation method as usual, and Nell, who is cautiously trying to approach the dormitory.

“Kurono isn’t here! Go home!” Lily shouts.

“I-I will not! I promised that I would continue teaching Kurono-kun after he came back from his quest!” Nell exclaims.

The sight of a princess quite seriously cowering before a small girl is rather comical, but for her, this is serious.

In any case, if I don’t go there, things won’t be resolved.

“Lily, isn’t it about time you started being nice to Nell?” I say.

“Kurono?!”

“Ah, Kurono-kun!”

Lily is wearing an uncomfortable expression while a flower-like smile blooms across Nell’s face.

“Sorry, Nell, Lily is still just a bit wary,” I say. “She definitely doesn’t mean any

harm, so please forgive her.”

“Yes, it is quite alright,” Nell says. “It does not bother me.”

Thanks for your wonderful royal smile. Nell truly is an angel.

“Muh!”

In contrast, Lily has puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. But she still flies into my chest and snuggles against me. Lily really is an adorable Fairy-san, even when she’s angry.

But as I spoil Lily like a cat, I can hear a quiet “Mumumu...” and feel a slightly stern gaze being sent my way from Nell. I’ll pretend not to notice.

“Let’s go inside for now,” I suggest.

And so I enter the dormitory with Lily in my arms, leading Nell inside. Our destination is the lounge. Not my room.

On the 9th of Blue Moon, the second Element Masters emergency meeting was held, and the topic of discussion was whether it’s alright for me to have Nell teach me magic. Since Nell is visiting like this, I obviously managed to get permission, but several rules were decided.

One of them is that the lessons aren’t held in my room.

If Lily doesn’t want others entering her room, then should she get her own room that’s separate from mine? I suggested this to her, and she cried. It seems that this isn’t the problem.

In any case, the magic lessons from Nell-sensei take place in the lounge. Well, as long as she’s teaching me, I don’t mind where it is, so I don’t have any particular objections to it.

“Kurono-kun, I have tea and snacks, so I’ll go and prepare them, alright?” says Nell.

Come to think of it, ever since the lesson on the 9th, Nell has always brought some kind of gift with her. Considering that I’m the one being taught, this pains me a little. But Nell’s tea and snacks are delicious, so I’m grateful for them as well. I’m always unintentionally taking advantage of her kindness.

“Thanks for everything,” I say.

“Not at all,” Nell says, giving me a bright smile as if to say that she knows me too well as she heads into the kitchen.

I’m ending up leaving all the preparations to her as well, but Nell is the only one who can prepare tea so well, so I hope she can forgive me.

“Lily, you have to thank her properly as well when you eat,” I say.

“... Mhmm.”

With Lily still in my arms, I sit down. This is the perfect posture to have Lily sit on my knees.

Incidentally, this is the second rule for the lessons. Having Lily present when I’m receiving the lessons, that is.

Having considered the unlikely possibility that Nell tries something to hack into my brain with telepathy, Lily is here because she can detect the use of telepathy immediately and defend my mind. I think this is being overly cautious, but this was something that Lily and Fiona would not yield on.

Of course, the witch’s expert opinion was that Fiona should be the one giving out the lessons to begin with.

And then I finally hardened my resolve and said it. I told her that it’s hard to understand through onomatopoeic sounds alone. Fiona cried. I wanted to cry, too. This is one of the pages in my book of difficult memories.

After we wait a few minutes, Nell appears, bringing steaming black tea and some mousse-like sweet snack in cups.

“Here, please drink it while it’s still hot,” she says.

She finishes skillfully setting the table, and, well, itadakimasu.

“Umm, last time, we finished after having done the basics of Protect Boost and Concentration Boost, didn’t we?” Nell continues.

While I enjoy this extremely delicious mousse, which was probably bought in a famous store in the upper district, I confirm how far our lessons had progressed. It has been a whole month, after all.

“That’s right,” I say. “These two are the top priorities for me to learn, so please hurry and continue.”

“Yes, please leave it to me!” Nell answers as she puffs her large chest out and slams a heavy grimoire on the table. It quivers. Even if there is no such thing as the huge-breast element, my eyes are subconsciously drawn there.

“Kurono, say ‘ahh!’”

“Mmm, err, ahh.”

Lily suddenly pushes her spoon towards me, so my eating what’s on it is mostly a conditioned reflex.

“Is it good?” she asks.

“It is,” I say. “You want some too, Lily?”

“Yeah! Ahh!”

I return the favor and feed Lily, who is sitting on my knees. I feel like a papa raising my daughter. Ah, how therapeutic.

Incidentally, the spoon that I’m using is one that Nell has brought. This silver thing, which has carvings in the shape of white wings on it and practically exudes luxury, is the same one that I used to eat the pudding when I visited Nell.

Nell brings not only this, but the whole set including the cups for the black tea. I can feel her incredible dedication.

However, her tableware set doesn’t go as far as to include a small spoon for a small child to use, so Lily’s spoon is her own.

As I shower Lily with affection, Nell, who is sitting opposite me, calls out to me while leaning forward.

“U-umm, Kurono-kun... That is, me as well...”

“Hmm, what is it?” I ask.

“M-me as well... Ah, ahh... it’s nothing.”

“I-is that so?”

As if suddenly giving up on something, Nell gives a troubled sigh and quietly returns to her original sitting position. Just what in the world was that? Could it be that me showing so much affection was really gross...? I think it's unlikely, but I'll be more careful from now on.

“– Gochisousama.”

Before long, we finish eating, and our first lesson in a month finally begins.

The fourth trial is waiting for me, after all. I'll learn Protect Boost and Concentration Boost to some extent over today and tomorrow, and challenge the Lust-Rose!

“Fuwah~.”

In complete contrast to my enthusiasm, Lily, who seems to have become sleepy after finishing eating the snack, lets out a yawn. Do your best, Kurono.

Chapter 381: Uninvited Partner

When one thinks back on it, Simon had never really formed a party. When he had first registered as an adventurer to earn his tuition fees, he naturally tried forming one but in the end it didn't work out. Nobody really wanted a helpless alchemist who couldn't even use a sword or magic.

And naturally, he went solo. He wasn't really aiming to rank up either and so he just went on doing the rank 1 quest of collecting medicinal plants over and over. But to Simon, this wasn't unfavourable.

If my memory serves me right, he probably also met Kurono from the Alsace village's adventurer guild when returning from the plant collecting quest. After that, started the hellish Alsace battle. And then the recent ,nightmarish battle of Iskia. In both of these battles, there were allies in the surrounding lands but they didn't really form parties. They only moved in a group temporarily.

And then, after the fight had ended, he was supposed to go back to his casual solo quests but—before he knew it, he had made a partner.

“Yaa, the weather is good. Ideal for questing.”

In the deep green forest, bright sunlight filtered through the trees and among all that, a cheerful, light voice reached Simon's elf ears.

“R-right...”

Replying with difficulty, he looked at the owner of that voice.

Even though the bottom half of her face was covered by a veil, just seeing her eyes makes you think she has a beautiful face.

This Dark Elf, who only introduced herself as Sofie, is Simon's partner for now.
(...How did it come to this....)

He thought back to exactly a month ago. It was when he had finally returned to his usual worn-out hostel from his elder sister's mansion.

“Welcome back, Simon. This person will be your partner from today. Her name is Sofie.”

And this was how the mysterious dark elf Sofie was forced onto him by Lily, when she greeted him with a bright smile.

“Simon, you will be trying out the guns you develop in real battles yourself from now on, won’t you? But it’s kinda worrying to let you go alone into a jungle and we will be busy with our quests so we can’t look after you. And so, I decided on having someone I can trust be your bodyguard.”

I understand the logic behind it. But this is way too sudden.

As if it was already assumed that this person will be appointed on me and the guarding and so on are just an excuse for it.

“And that’s how it is, so, I look forward to it, Simon.”

“Ye-yes...”

But, it is also true that he couldn’t really deny either.

“For certain circumstances, I will not reveal her identity but I can guarantee that her background and skills are good. So don’t worry too much and go do your test shooting.”

Lily just went on one-sidedly and didn’t let him slip in a word, and on top of that—

“I see. Please feel at home then.”

He was even abandoned by Kurono, who came in later.

And so, without having a choice, he ended up coming to the dungeon like this with the mysterious onee-chan, Sofie.

There were countless points he was worried about but now that he had come all the way here, he decided on accomplishing his first objective, at the very least.

“Hmm... Let’s do it around here.”

In front of Simon’s eyes, there was a small lake.

This was the ‘Latifundy forest’, aka Laty’s forest, where Sparda’s adventurers routinely come. Its difficulty is sorted into four ranks but as only low ranked monsters such as slimes and goblins live in the shallow parts of the forest, it is a

suitable field for beginner adventurers. Of course, to gather medicinal plants.

“Sofie-san, you do properly understand why I came to the dungeon without even accepting a quest, right?”

As soon as he reached the designated river’s bank, Simon raised his voice. Sofie was being awfully over-familiar, treating him like a child but he didn’t feel any ill will from her. It would be best to cooperate here, he thought.

“Ah, of course, it is to test the performance of a weapon called the machine gun, right?”

As a matter of fact, he had been developing the machine gun concurrently with the rifle right after returning from Alsace. The rifle took shape first but this time, after having attended Iskia’s lessons, he finished the machine gun with maximum priority.

Even still, he would hesitate to even call it a prototype at this stage. After all was said and done, Simon can’t really accept the fact that the most important part of the gun, the part which makes consecutive shots possible, is reliant on magic.

This would just make it a simple magic staff.

Nevertheless, he still prioritized making something usable as soon as possible.

“Yes. This machine gun, you see—”

And while explaining, he turned his usual dimension pouch upside down, and clumps of steel fell on the floor and scattered around. Of course, this was not any junk, it was the machine gun’s parts.

“As you can see, it isn’t a weapon one can carry alone. Basically, it is a weapon you’d set up on ground or on a rampart.”

“I see. So it is similar to a ballista?”

He dragged out a large gun barrel at the end and assembled all the parts.

First, the tripod. He wasn’t planning on moving and as such, didn’t prepare wheels for it.

“Since we are going to be test shooting on monsters, we would have to wait

here but—”

“Leave it to me. I just need to bring them over here, right?”

It saved him the trouble since she knew what to do. As expected of someone that Lily acknowledges. Simon’s expectations of her raised up a notch.

“It is a bit risky but if you can do it, then please.”

“Rank 2 monsters would be the majority around here so it isn’t a problem. Well then, I will be back.”

With that said, Sofie left like the wind. She crossed the small river with a single leap.

Simon had heard she was of the magician class but to demonstrate that level of physical ability—he was honestly surprised. He didn’t understand the secret behind her huge leap—whether it was martial arts, boots or just simple strength but even still, he understood that it was genuinely amazing.

If she’s this good, she might be able to properly draw the monsters to the other side, the killzone.

“Alright, I need to put this together fast.”

And like that, even while having trouble picking up heavy parts, he had finished assembling the whole thing before long.

It looked quite similar to the one he had made at the Alsace village. Very unshapely—seeing how a long barrel just flies out of a rectangle box. To be frank, it looks pretty bad. Kurono, who had seen the real thing, naturally thought the same, and even the creator, Simon, knew it looked lame as a weapon.

But even so, it is true that this is a much advanced version of the hurried one he made in Alsace.

The standard structure of this one was that of a gatling gun, as Kurono had called it. Simon’s machine gun’s structure was similar to the one of Earth’s where magic didn’t exist.

To be exact, it was similar to the first gatling gun in existence in Earth’s history.

The decisive difference is that the firing is not done by gunpowder but rather the fire attribute's magic.

The shells are connected in a belt without any gunpowder and they are shot just as they are and so, the anti-shell process doesn't exist here.

And because of this, there was the merit of not having shells clog up but, even more than that, the demerit of having to rely on magic was high.

Simon can't use magic—in other words, he doesn't have mana. To operate the magic shooting system built inside, magic items were needed.

And for that, he simply used a processed fire attribute magic stone but the cost to mass produce that would be too high. Moreover, if the mana supply provided by this item runs out, the machine gun won't shoot. Even if the shells still remain.

The gun won't have any meaning if the general public like Simon can't use them. Thinking of that future, he needed to get rid of all magic related stuff in it.

It would take quite a bit of time to complete the machine gun—thought Simon. But soon switched over, thinking that now is the time to be testing out what he had progressed so far.

“Well then, first, I will check its behaviour—”

First test shooting. He didn't really establish any target or anything, he just wanted to confirm if the thing would even shoot the shells or not.

Even the powerless Simon could rotate the crank which was properly greased.

The gun barrels made rattling sound as they started moving and at the same time, the bullet belt started rolling up on the inside.

A parched firing of a gun resounded in the forest.

“Yes! It worked properly!”

Theoretically, it could fire about 200 shots per minute. But for now, just that it worked properly was enough.

Since the gatling gun has 6 barrels to shoot from, the heat released from

shooting is dispersed much easily. It was obvious as numerous barrels are being rotated in sequence to shoot bullets but it is an important effect.

But it is a secret how Kurono actually went ‘oh it shoots from 6 barrels simultaneously, amazing!’ when he first saw it.

“This could probably easily kill 10 to 20 slime or goblin.”

Simon was looking forward to Sofie’s return so that he could shoot at moving targets.

And after waiting for about 30 minutes, with a rustling sound, Sofie came jumping out of the thicket. Simon wouldn’t mistake her for the enemy and accidentally shoot, of course.

Although, even if by chance he did shoot, someone as skilled as Sofie could dodge it even at point blank range—or so bragged Lily.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. There aren’t a lot but I think it’s enough for a shooting test.”

Again, making the huge leap from the other side of the river, before Simon realized, she had come right beside him and whispered in his ears. Too close.

While feeling a chill through his spine, for now, Simon just replied with a ‘thank you very much’.

Saying that, he shifted his attention back to the monsters on the other side. He couldn’t see them but could definitely hear the goblins’ high pitched voices from inside the forest, coming towards them.

Sofie did say there weren’t a lot of them but she was probably being modest. After all, no matter how you thought about it, their chorus didn’t sound as small as 10 or 20 goblins’ would.

“Umm, Sofie-san... did you count about how many goblins you brought?”

Simon frankly asked, all the while feeling sweat run through his hand which gripped the crank.

“Hmmm, about a hundred, I would say.”

‘Fortunately, I found their nest quite close, you see’—such an explanation

didn't even enter Simon's ears.

"Uwaah, they are here?!"

Along with a jarring high-pitched screaming voice, a huge group of goblins jumped on the river bank.

In reaction to the clear unexpected amount of enemy, Simon reflexively rotated the crank as fast as he could.

The new weapon which the prodigal alchemist diligently built up had started spitting out lead balls as fast as it could. Just as a gatling burst.

"Waaahh!! Too many! There's too many of them, Sofie-san!!"

"Hahahahaha, I am glad you are pleased!"

"My life is flashing before my eyes!!"

Even while screaming, Simon skillfully used the machine gun and didn't let the goblins get close.

Just as the time in Alsace village, the enemy were held up in the river and couldn't move immediately. On top of that, their movement also became dull.

As expected, they are a good target but unfortunately, there are too many of them.

If the recoil from the shots were just a bit more, Simon's slim hands wouldn't be able to control the barrel.

Even though the machine gun was working as intended, even at this moment, the goblins were relying on their numbers to force their way through the river.

If it's only 5 of them, he could deal somehow with the new prototype rifle he brought along.

However, with this big of a group in front of him, if even one of them escaped and got above, the rest would keep following one by one and it would be over.

"This is bad, this is bad, I can't—"

The goblins, who dauntlessly took the frontal barrage of the machine gun, were falling one by one, getting hit by the rain of lead bullets. With the scattered blood and entrails, the small river was dyed red in an instant.

The goblins, who didn't really have tough scales or shells, didn't really have a means to defend themselves from the high speed raining bullets. If even one of those high caliber bullets hit them anywhere on the body, they would be rendered unable to fight. If they fall on the ground, they will die of blood loss—if they fall in the river, they would die by drowning. They couldn't escape death.

It was a one-sided massacre. But in fact, due to just a slight miss from Simon's part, the fight had turned into a tightrope walk of attack and defense for the goblins.

"Good luck, Simon! Just a little left."

"I can't, really I can't—ah... ah, ahhh—!"

It was truly a fighting scene—with gunfire and shrieks and warm cheering.

"Haaa.... Haa... I did it... I somehow did it..."

He himself didn't really realize how he had done it, but he finally killed all the goblins. The last one was only 2 meters away from the gun barrel before it turned into minced meat.

If nothing else, it was the best possible proof of the machine gun's potential.

But, however,

"Sofie-san! You gathered up too much!"

Simon, who had thought he was actually going to die, couldn't help but say that much. On top of that, having crossed the point between life and death, he was also a little high.

Complains came first rather than constraint.

"You wanted to test your prized new weapon so I thought it could kill about a hundred or two hundred goblins easily."

"Only a rank 5 adventurer can easily deal with that amount of goblins!"

If a hundred goblin came in a group, even a rank 4 adventurer would have a hard time dealing with them solo.

"Really? I think you did a wonderful job of annihilating them, though."

"I would have died if there were even one more of them!"

“It’s fine, I will protect you.”

She said that, brimming of confidence, but as Simon didn’t really catch a glimpse of her strength first-hand, he couldn’t really be honestly relieved.

“Haa... Well, for now, it worked out so I guess it’s okay.”

Giving up and comprising is one of the most important things in a human relationship. In that sense, Simon was a responsible adult.

Keeping the complaints at his throat, he only thought about how he would go on to interact with her keeping the gap of common sense in mind.

Since they had killed about a hundred goblins, the surrounding was filled with corpses and scent of blood. It was only a matter of time till monsters with a good sense of smell appeared.

After producing the best results, the gun barrel had completely heated up.

The gun barrel of this new prototype was made using the iron sand of Greeding-Gore which Kurono acquired. It was immensely sturdier than the hurried version in the Alsace battle but even still, to use it for long periods with stable performance, cooling it timely was necessary so that it didn’t deform from the heat.

However, he didn’t prepare an efficient cooling system for now. And naturally, he decided to rely on his magician partner.

“Sofie-san, you said you were good at water magic, right?”

“Yea, my other elemental magic is average but I can confidently say I am good at water magic. I have a few original magics as well as high level ones.”

It is a condition to be recognized as a first class magician—to produce original magic which cross even high level ones. Of course, it is because original magic can’t be made that easily that first rate magicians are first rate.

At any rate, if what Sofie says is true, then her skills as a magician is first class—no, as she has acquired a few original magic, it won’t be an exaggeration to call her super first class.

When a water magic user who is a beautiful dark elf comes to mind, Simon would—no, anyone would think of a rank 5 adventurer.

“That is amazing. Like the Valkyrie Blizzard Sofie san.”

Like... or rather it is completely like her. The name, even the looks.

“...You are... not her, right?”

He went out and asked her using this opportunity.

“Of course not, you can tell by seeing this face, right?”

“No, you’re hiding your face with a magic item, aren’t you?”

He can’t use magic, but he does have knowledge of it. He could tell her face veil was a magic item which had an effect of recognition obstruction. Even though he can see her face, for some reason, it doesn’t leave traces in his memories—That weird feeling is exactly a trait of that magic.

“For reasons, I can’t reveal my face, But, from the perspective of other races, all dark elves look the same and Sofie isn’t really an uncommon name either, right?”

“Right. That person is the board chairman of the theological school and she wouldn’t have any time to be hanging around with me.”

“Right? Being a principle is tough.”

Even while being caught by her way of saying it, as if she experienced it herself, Simon thought he shouldn’t be worrying about trivial things now and went on to request what he should prioritize.

“And, so, I want Sofie-san, who is good at water magic, to cool this gun barrel.”

It pains him to say this but magic is omnipotent. Even if he made a really efficient cooling system after thinking really hard, a magician would just as easily do it without any trouble, as if to ridicule him.

He was most jealous of it but he left that aside for now.

“Can you do it?”

“Of course, no problem.”

Saying that, Sofie touched the gun barrel with her finger.

“It is dangerous to touch it lik—”

‘Whoosh’—intense evaporation rose and took along Simon’s warning with it. And suddenly, white steam got denser.

No matter how skilled of a magician she is, to touch a high temperature metal with bare hands is crazy. He didn’t know how confident she had to be do that but he was expecting a shrilling shriek from her the next moment but —‘clanngg!’

“...Eh?”

Instead of the shriek he had expected, Simon heard a tremendously unpleasant sound.

At that time, as the wind blew the steam away, there a tragedy had happened.

“It’s broken?!”

The gun barrel had broke. Marvelously—completely in half.

“Sorry, seems like I cooled it a bit too much.”

Most people know of the phenomenon which takes place when you rapidly cool an intensely high temperature object. You wouldn’t even have to be an alchemist to know that. A glass breaking due to really hot tea being poured in it—it’s a horror story most people have experienced.

But to rapid cool so much so that you would break steel in two... Sofie was the first person he ever saw who could do that.

“I didn’t think it would break so easily...”

Simon had also been thinking the same. It wasn’t just any simple steel, it was an alloy made from rank 5 monsters—and to think that broke so easily. It was only because he thought it would be fine even if Sofie did some rapid cooling that he asked her.

But this is the result.

Her wonderful talent as a water magic user was proven but of course, he couldn’t really go and say ‘as expected of an amazing original water magic user’.

Of course, he could not.

He was nearing his tolerance limit.

“...Da...”

Simon had only one thing to declare.

“Eh, what?”

Sofie timidly asked, looking at Simon’s downcast face.

“...Can’t take it anymore... this party is over.”

In response to his breakup declaration in tears, it was only after 30 seconds had passed that Sofie started weeping and apologizing.

Chapter 382: The Adventurer's Guild of Asbel Village

The twenty-third day of the Frozen Soil month. At the end of an eleven-day's journey towards our quest in the Asbel Mountain Range, we, the "Element Masters", arrived to the nearby Asbel Village.

First, we headed to the Adventurer's Guild of the village.

"Seriously, I never expected we would be receiving the rumoured Nightmare Berserker here." (Jimmy-san)

That was the first thing Jimmy-san, the Guild Master of the village that requested the Lust-Rose Subjugation, said to us.

Even though he seems to be well over sixty, this old man's sturdy body doesn't appear to have declined. He welcomed us with a mix of astonishment and joy that was clearly revealed by his speech, but I was unable to meekly accept that.

"Umm... Why do you know about me?" (Kurono)

"Your fame precedes you all the way to Avalon." (Jimmy-san)

It seems that what happened at the Battle of Iskia is spreading through the group of city-states in central Pandora. Especially in Avalon, since that's where First Prince Nero was. It became quite the hot topic.

Avalon. Yes, right now I am visiting the borderlands of Mia-chan's Avalon for the first time.

This village is located at the southern tip of the very long and northwards stretching Asbel Mountain Range, where the Lust-Rose is hidden. Three whole countries are crossed by the mountain range: Avalon to the south. The mountainous country of Wyndham, where the harpies live is in the middle. And, finally, to the north, is the elven country of Ortensia.

But, as expected, the most famous image of the mountain range seems to be Avalon. The reason being that at this southern tip of the mountain range is where the farm where the Ancient Demon King, Mia Elroad, lived her childhood as a shepherdess. Of course, since all that remain is what was passed down in

legends, the exact location of the farm is unknown. Even now, it seems that archaeologists are obsessed with conducting on-site researches to identify the actual location... Guess I'll ask about it next time.

Thinking about it, because of the legend, the royal family of Avalon built their villa in this place. Nell told me about how she used to look forward to coming here when she was a child.

Anyways, now it's time to talk about the quest. I have no choice but to give up about my embarrassing nickname of Nightmare Berserker spreading fast and not staying in Spada.

"So, about the Lust-Rose, what detailed information could you give us?"
(Kurono)

We came to meet the client to specifically procure information about the current trial's target, a Rank 5 monster.

Reserving the conference room in the second floor of the Guild was quite smooth, and was prepared ahead of time for our meeting.

But, just looking at this countryside village's simple wooden conference room, reminds me of Alsace Village... I listened to the explanation while immersed in sentimentality.

"Oh, the first one to discover the Lust-Rose's nest was I—." (Jimmy-san)

We were told many bitter memories. Starting by the discovery thirty years ago, when Jimmy-san was still an active adventurer.

The first victims were three youths with promising futures, members of a Rank 4 party.

"Inside, those three did not seem to be any different from usual. But, midway, they started repeating the same lines they just said over and over again."
(Jimmy-san)

Thanks to being in contact with them using a telepathic device, he was able to notice the anomaly. However, it seems the device encountered interference midway, and to the bitter end was only able to hear their voices fragmentarily.

In the end, those three never returned from the cave.

“It seemed that they didn’t fight directly with the monster, but fell into an abnormal condition. I’m sure it was something different from being charmed or confused, at the very least it was a bewitching effect that made them lose their mind.” (Jimmy-san)

“Why did you conclude that the monster from the cave was the Lust-Rose?” (Kuroono)

“Dwelling in a cave with the walls covered in thorny vines like those of a rose, the use of an unknown magic, and the occurrence of the ominous pink gas. The Lust-Rose was the only one that matched those conditions.” (Jimmy-san)

“You didn’t confirm its appearance?” (Kuroono)

“I’m sorry to say that I searched for detailed information about the Lust-Rose’s appearance, but there was none. Since more or less all the related documents are here, you can look through them later.” (Jimmy-san)

However, with a bitter smile, Jimmy-san told us he didn’t believe it would be very useful.

As expected, there are many cases of lacking accurate information for a monster related to a trial. Well, I anticipated it would be like this, I’m grateful for being able to receive any small amount of information.

“Moreover, with the information left by the adventurers that challenged the cave until now, the credibility rises.” (Jimmy-san)

When they challenged the cave for a second time, their top priority was the monster residing there. Prioritizing on confirming its appearance and bringing back accurate information, rather than defeating it.

“At that time I entered the cave as a member of the reconnaissance team. We found three bodies completely cased in ice... Naturally, I didn’t think that those three were alive, but the sight of their smiling faces filled me with dread.” (Jimmy-san)

The bewitching effect continued working up to the moment of their death, they might have even passed away without noticing.

“When you went with the reconnaissance team, did you only get to check on

the bodies?” (Kurono)

“Thanks to the communication device, we knew that the first branching part of the road diverged to the left and to the right at some point, we decided to stop advancing after that point. We found the three bodies on the right path of the fork.” (Jimmy-san)

According to what he remembered from those days, the three had decided to advance through the left path. But they were found in the right path when it should have been the left one. It’s possible that one of the effects included in the bewitching was capable of making people lose their direction.

“The third time, an adventurer with an anti-magic item challenged the cave. However, he did not return.” (Jimmy-san)

After that, every time was the same as Jimmy-san’s first incursion. They sent adventurers that would go into the cave carrying a telepathic communication item, but, as expected, the results were always the same.

No matter how many times they tried, after the bifurcation, it always ended with them repeating their words.

At that point, it’s already too late. It becomes impossible for the affected person to find the exit, even when they are told to return, since their sense of direction becomes twisted and keep thinking that they are on the correct path to the exit.

“How did the person that wrote this documents defeat that monster?” (Kurono)

The presented documents with the scarce information regarding the Lust-Rose included one clear fact: that the monster had been successfully subjugated.

“No idea. Because he never spoke in detail about the fight against the Lust-Rose.” (Jimmy-san)

That person was a devout male priest that served in a temple in Pandora. Since his Class was Cleric, one can assume that an especially powerful attack is not needed to defeat it.

This Lust-Rose is like the Sloth-Gil, a monster that specializes in weak points. Therefore, it's combat ability should be low when compared to the Wrathpun or the Greed-Gore.

"Being a Cleric, could it be that he merely avoided the bewitchment?"
(Kurono)

Compared to a Swordsman or a Warrior, a Cleric's ability to defend its mind should excel.

"Oh, I think so too. He was also a high-ranking priest, said to be able to use Ancient Healing Magic." (Jimmy-san)

Just like Nell. He possessed an ability worthy of Rank 5.

Yet, I wonder why he did not talk about how he defeated it. I would have liked to ask him directly, but it is physically impossible since he passed away decades ago.

"Since he was in a high-ranking position, he might have hesitated to talk about his fight against a Succubus-Type Lust-Rose." (Jimmy-san)

"That would mean that, uh... the battle against the Lust-Rose could become a sexual one?" (Kurono)

"I don't know the details but, in his last words, the priest said that at that time he should have been killed by the Lust-Rose with his companions." (Jimmy-san)

Apparently, the death brought by a Succubus seems to be a very sweet one.

This is an opponent I have to prepare myself for, in various ways!

"Hmm~" (Lily)

"... Mm." (Fiona)

The moment I thought that. Lily and Fiona, who were sitting to my left and right, glanced at me with cold eyes. No, I don't have any particular anticipation for this! Aren't they misunderstanding something!?

Having finished listening to Jimmy-san's explanation, we left the conference room. The guild's first floor, just like the one back in Irz Village, is jointly built with a bar. However, this is a village located near the famous Asbel Mountain

Range Dungeon, so the amount of clients here is way higher than the one at Irz Village.

It's still morning, and there are numerous people proceeding towards their quests. One can catch sight of many parties gathered in the bar, having breakfast and discussing together.

As usual, Fiona is staring in the direction of the smell. But, Fiona-san, didn't we eat breakfast just a while ago?

Anyways, we already hear the story and finished the quest's procedures, we no longer have any business in the Guild. All that's left is to go towards the snowy mountains of Asbel, so, as I enthusiastically exited through the door, at that moment...

"That's why it wasn't my fault— Eh, ehh!? You're the Nightmare—" (???)

"—Kurono-kun!?" (???)

Coming in loudly through the opened door, were faces I recognized. Three faces that, if possible, I would have liked to not see.

"Oh, Nell?" (Kurono)

What appeared were the members of Wing Road. The one at the head of the group, and the first one to see me and shout, was the battle-maniac Kai. He was immediately pushed aside by Nell, who came running to me with a pitter-patter.

"Waaa, why is Kurono-kun here!?—Kyan!" (Nell)

Immediately, Nell impulsively came to hug me, but was suddenly stopped by a flash that made her flinch.

"He-Hey, Lily..." (Kurono)

"It's because she came charging too abruptly." (Lily)

Pouting, without looking repentant for the situation, Lily revealed her wariness while standing in front of me protectively. The same interaction as ever.

It would be fine if we were at the dormitory or the lounge, but the kind Nell is

not the only one present here. The seriously-on-guard and exemplary-looking royalty Nero is also here.

“Why are you here? Kurono.” (Nero)

Aw, come on. With an ill-humoured look, similar to Lily’s, the red-mantled prince enters the stage.

“Even if you ask, the only answer I can give you is that we came here for a quest.” (Kurono)

“If it is for a quest, don’t tell me it is—” (Nero)

Nero’s reaction gave me a bad feeling.

“The Lust-Rose subjugation!?” (Kurono)

“The Fenrir subjugation!?” (Nero)

Nope. Totally nope.

“It’s not like the quest is reserved...” (Kurono)

“Tsk, you surprised me...” (Nero)

Frowning, Nero smiled wryly.

I thought we might have booked the same quest, but gladly they were different ones. If there was a duplicated booking, it would become first come, first served, naturally, the difficulty of succeeding rises greatly. Even more so if the other party is Wing Road.

“Either way, we are going to the same dungeon. For heaven’s sake do not become a hindrance for—” (Nero)

“Forgive him Kurono-kun, my brother, you know, is burning with a sense of rivalry since he couldn’t actively participate in Iskia.” (Nell)

“Nell!? Do not say inappropriate things!” (Nero)

Nero’s expression betrayed how vexed he was, while Nell giggled with a smile befitting a holy woman. This may be the reversing of the usual Elroad sibling’s relation mechanics, with Nell not being at the mercy of her overly-excellent older brother.

“Kurono-kun is also going to the Asbel Mountain Range, right? If that’s the case then, let’s go midway together—” (Nell)

“Kurono, go!” (Lily)

“Let’s go away, Kurono-san” (Fiona)

Whether I wanted it or not, I was forced to advance by Lily pulling my right hand and Fiona entwining herself in my left arm.

“Sorry Nell, see you.” (Kurono)

I would have refused Nell’s proposal even if those two didn’t force me away. Excluding Nell, the members of Wing Road are way too hostile, and above all is the dangerous person willingly aiming for my life, named Safiel. Lily and Fiona are aware of these circumstances and, despite glaring to Nell, they are actually paying attention to Safiel, who’s standing in the back of the group. Seriously, we might start killing each other if we are careless.

“That is... Sorry for asking unreasonable things, Kurono-kun.” (Nell)

However, it pains me to see her clearly disappointed face, if I’m not resolute enough, I’ll quickly end up becoming a Japanese who can’t say “no”. I have to thank my companions for forcibly pulling me away.

Then, feeling miserable, I was dragged towards the Guild’s door by my reliable companions.

“Hey, Kurono! Since I’m not losing next time, you better prepare your neck!” (Kai)

Bluntly declaring some disturbing things with a refreshing smile on his face, was Kai. As I thought, this guy is slightly off.

“I can always be your opponent for matches not involving losing one’s life.” (Kurono)

“Heheh, thanks man!” (Kai)

He is a simple-minded, smiling man. Even though he is a battle-freak, he might not be a bad guy inside.

I would like to try having a genuine swords match. In school, there’s no one

better than him as an opponent for sword practice.

“So, I’m wondering, when will you return my Demon Eyes?” (Safiel)

“They are my Demon Eyes. Scram.” (Kuronono)

“If that’s the case, then I’ll receive a set of Greed-Gore and Sloth-Gil raw materials now.” (Safiel)

“Stop nonchalantly increasing your demands.” (Kuronono)

We passed by the nonchalant joker that is Safiel Maya Hydra. There is no need to be courteous with the woman who is obsessed with this head.

“What a greedy man. I hope you die.” (Safiel)

We finally left the Guild after that last brutal comment.

By the way, I get the feeling that Wing Road was missing someone— Well, whatever.

Chapter 383: The Asbel Mountain Range

A white world, as far as the eye can see. Fields of snow glittering sparkingly under the sunshine of early winter coming down from the clear skies. The contrast between the vibrant *blue* and the glistening *white* dazzling our eyes.

In Spada, autumn was coming to an end. But, I find myself a step ahead of the season, setting foot on a land of midwinter.

At the northernmost tip of Avalon laid the Asbel Mountain Range. It's been two hours since our unexpected meeting with Wing Road at the Guild, and we are now in the Dungeon Area, where monsters could appear at any time.

"As expected, it's quite cold..." (Kurono)

Even with bright sunshine and a clear weather, the temperature here is quite low. I don't have a thermometer at hand, but I'm certain that it's below zero degrees.

"Lily, aren't you cold?" (Kurono)

"I'm okaaay." (Lily)

Thus replied the White Punpun—not, but Lily who was wearing her usual White-pun robe pyjamas.

Rather than being strong against extreme temperatures, as magic beings, fairies aren't influenced by them. Even if Lily is only a half-fairy, she still inherited half of that trait, making her quite strong against temperature variations when compared to a human. Even so, she felt like trying out her cold-resistant equipment.

With the rabbit ears of her hooded robe shaking, like a kindergartener looking forward to a trip, Lily walked spiritedly.

"Fiona, how are you doing?" (Kurono)

"No problem. I have experienced Dungeons in snowy mountains several times." (Fiona)

As expected of Fiona, a veteran adventurer. She seems to have already been

prepared with equipment for errands in cold regions, wearing some warm fluffy fur, thicker than her usual witch robe. Rather than a robe, it was a coat made of genuine fur.

Her feet equipment was also impeccable, instead of her usual loafers, she was wearing knee-high boots that seemed to be made of heavy leather. Strangely, her soles were always threading lightly above the snow, never sinking deeply in it.

The trick behind it was the effect of the *Feather* spell. This brittle foothold also served to exhibit the real worth of the *Fairy Dancing Shoes*, enchanted with the *Feather* spell, that Lily was wearing. It seemed that when it came to the highest class ones, those even allowed its wearer to do a hop, step and jump while walking on water.

Even if it didn't go as far as that, it's true that being able to walk unhindered over the fluffily piled-up powder snow was a really convenient effect to have. When I told Fiona that it would be nice if she wore that instead of the usual, she replied "I do not like wearing it very much, since it is awfully stuffy."

Ah, that answer made me realize that Fiona's also a girl.

Anyways, I was currently regretting being the only one without a pair of conveniently *Feather*-enchanted shoes to walk on this snowy mountain. I advanced while relying on my legs' strength for the snowploughing.

"Is Kurono-san not cold?" (Fiona)

But, with only her gaze, Fiona also asked if I was fine with my usual equipment. Without need for any false bravado, I honestly answered "No problem."

"Ah, it's because I can endure quite a bit of cold and heat." (Kurono)

Since my body is different from a normal person's, it's possible that I've been altered to not be affected by extreme temperatures to same degree as Lily.

In fact, I wasn't cold even when the temperature was in the negative degrees. I felt a bit chilly at most.

"However, I am not sure if that still counts when you are wearing just an

apprentice's robe." (Fiona)

Wow, I forgot to change into *Diablo's Embrace*...

Once I changed clothes, the chill completely vanished. As expected from proper equipment, its cold-resistant function was also perfect. I gave the apprentice's robe I just took off to Fiona, who folded it neatly and tucked it away inside her hat, and I felt quite embarrassed when she gave me a rather amazed look.

In this manner, besides my bit of carelessness, the first mountain climbing of the "Element Masters" smoothly advanced.

The cave we are aiming for, where the Lust-Rose dwells, isn't located in the unexplored hinterlands of the mountain range, nor is it near the territory of Rank 5 monsters. It is located somewhere halfway up in the mountains.

However, there are other reasons as to why the Asbel Mountain Range is designated as Rank 5—Well, since this time they are irrelevant to us, let's leave them aside.

Anyways, from the base of the mountain up to somewhere in the middle, strong Rank 3 monsters that shouldn't represent any difficulty for mid-ranked adventurers may appear. I think that the mountain's base is an ideal area for new adventurers.

The areas near the cave have a lot of people coming and going, which means that it has been mapped extensively. Luckily, we are not people without a sense of direction, we all know how to properly read a map, and we have an accurate map; so there's no need for worry.

"If we keep advancing like this, we'll reach the cave before sundown."
(Kurono)

"Wouldn't that be difficult?" (Fiona)

My conjecture was immediately shot down, but there was nothing for me to question or refute to. I simply understood the reason and agreed with it.

"It's a Dungeon, of course we were going to encounter monsters." (Kurono)

"Oh no! There's a presence!" (Lily)

That's right, we are about to have our first encounter with a monster that lives in this mountain.

We are in a vantage point on a gentle slope. There's only a dense overgrown conifer forest far ahead and no cover to hide behind while advancing. In addition, with these clear skies it's unlikely for our vision of the surrounding area to get obscured, we can also immediately detect anything approaching us from the sky.

However, we are not seeing any signs of the enemy in our surroundings. Nevertheless, from the skin-piercing sensation of Freezing Magic I'm feeling, there's no doubt that the enemy is close.

Where? Where is it coming from? —At that moment, right in front of me, who's walking as the vanguard, a spot in the ground of about five meters suddenly rose. Penetrating the thick layer of snow, the monster jumped out from underground —Or so I thought, but what appeared there was really big snowman.

“Eh? What's with this snowman?” (Kurono)

With a length of about two meters, it was a stubby man-shaped snow sculpture. Its head was big and round like a watermelon, the two dots and dented line in its face seemed to be something like its eyes and mouth.

And then, snowmen with the exact same design started appearing all around. Sprouting from the snow like bamboo shoots were ten, no, twenty —thirty or more of them. I gave up counting, a cursory glance was enough to see that there were over a hundred of them.

“Those are Ice Elementals.” (Fiona)

As though it were not unusual, with no hesitation, Fiona correctly guessed their identity.

Elementals are a kind of exemplary magical creatures, born when spontaneously produced coloured magic gets lumped together. Their weak form is a swaying transparent orb floating in the air like some kind of jellyfish, when its magic density increases, it takes a clearer shape and turns into something like these snowmen. Obtaining a physical body by using a material

with high affinity with its attribute.

The most famous examples are the naturally occurring undead and golems. Dark Elementals and Terra Elementals, born by possessing corpses and rocks, respectively.

Incidentally, even in ruins that became Dungeons, which are unsuitable for wildlife to inhabit in, the reason for so many monsters to still exist there is that the environment is densely filled with mana, naturally allowing large quantities of elementals to be generated. Because of this, similar to plankton, elementals are considered the lowest in the food chain.

But, as indispensable as elementals might be for the wild monsters' environment, they are simply foes for adventurers.

Nevertheless, when it comes to a group as big as this one, it becomes quite troublesome even if they belong to Rank 1.

"What should we do, Kurono-san? Their pace seems to be slow, so I believe that we can simply leave." (Fiona)

"Nah, these are just the perfect opponents to shoot at, so why not leave them to me?" (Kurono)

I'm sure a smug smile is showing on my face. Still, if you're a man, you'll never be without a grin!

"*The Greed*, machine gun form Gattling-Gore Mode." (Kurono)

From my deep black shadow extending on the surface of the pure white snow, appeared a jet-black heavy artillery weapon. Not even three seconds were needed for me to get in position, load it, and be ready to fire.

"Eat this, *Burst!*" (Kurono)

The six-barrelled gun started creaking once the high-speed rotation began, and the countless white shapes standing in front of the muzzle got pulverized by the spouting fire.

My pseudo-*full metal jacket*, which boasts the same hardness as a ball of lead, easily smashed through the elementals' brittle snow bodies. With just one shot, arms were flying and legs were crumbing. And whenever a shot hit them

in the middle, their bodies got teared into five.

It has the power to cause instant death with only one shot, and it's capable of firing two thousand rounds per minute, achieving a firing speed equivalent to a real Gatling Gun.

There's no way for the snowmen to be formed before this black storm of gunfire.

"Huff... Puff... How's that?" (Kurono)

The annihilation was completed in an instant. Even when surrounding us on all four sides, just by shooting in a clockwise manner they crumbled one by one. These slow snowmen were no more than simple targets.

But, as my agitated breath shows, I'm actually pretty tired. As a matter of fact, it's unclear whether I managed to shoot two thousand rounds per minute. The reload was too much to keep up with, I had to be fully focussed with all my might on producing the black magic bullets.

It might be better to drop the firing rate a bit. With that tremendous firing speed, there were too many stray shots.

Even so, until now, *Gatling Burst* has been showing a remarkable effect. It's probable that, rather than using the *Black Ballista Replica*, this way the power and momentum is superior. As expected, having a personalized weapon is wonderfully effective.

"Kurono-san, you seem to be a little short of breath. Is it possible that you're not feeling well?" (Fiona)

Just as I was feeling deeply moved by the wonderful performance of *The Greed*, this happens.

"No, wait, wait a minute. That's what you're saying after seeing such an intense attack?" (Kurono)

"Was it really that intense?" (Fiona)

Being asked again with a serious look, I got anxious. I have to calm down and have more confidence in myself.

"Yes, it was really intense." (Kurono)

“Eh? But wasn’t it just the same as the usual *Full Burst*?” (Fiona)

“No! It was completely different! Wasn’t the fire power incredibly higher!?”
(Kurono)

“Haa...” (Fiona)

Fiona didn’t show any understanding at all for my desperate complaints.
Damn it. If that’s case, the wise Lily will surely understand the difference!

“Nn?” (Lily)

Ah, it’s that hopeless pattern. Lily has a face of not understanding the gist of the conversation at all.

“Eh? Kurono-san, by any chance, could it be that you’re little sulky?” (Fiona)

I wonder if that was showing too much on my face. No, I was just in a bit of denial from the shock. I’ll just obediently accept it.

But I’ll definitively never sulk or pout.

“No way. Thinking properly about it, unlike with Simon, it was naïve on my part to expect gun amateurs like Lily and Fiona to understand the difference.”
(Kurono)

“Mu, for some reason I feel like I’m being look down upon.” (Fiona)

“Lily is a woman that properly understands the difference!” (Lily)

“Oh well, please don’t get me wrong. I just wanted both of you to see and evaluate my flashy move.” (Kurono)

I’m now confident enough to boast about my “flashy move” before ‘Fiona of the Golden SunAur Soleil’ and ‘StarfallMeteor Strike Lily’.

Incidentally, it seems that just the right target to receive this move has appeared. This is quite convenient, as if Nature itself cooperated for my demonstration.

This time for sure, I’ll show them how cool it is. Enthusiastically, I adopted a posture for shooting from the hip and aimed *The Greed*’s muzzle downwards.

“Well then, let’s leave that big *High Ice Elemental* as a target for Kurono-san.”
(Fiona)

“Kurono, do your best!” (Lily)

As if to drown Lily’s lovely cheer, while spouting snow in surging waves, Fiona’s so called *High Ice Elemental* showed up.

To describe its appearance in one word, it was a whale.

With a huge body of snow, similar to the Greed-Gore in size, it showed up on the snowy field as if it were emerging from the bottom of the sea. Its body was made in the same manner as the snowmen that I’d defeated just before, a simple structure of gathered snow that’s been hardened. But, as expected, just by being huge its presence was overwhelming.

It’s a relief that this guy appeared in the lower regions of the mountain, near the base. If it had appeared higher or closer the summit, the slightest of its movements would’ve washed away the area with a bursting avalanche.

We had no time to slack at all. The huge whale was furiously swimming up the slope to swallow us.

The surrounding snow surged as it rode on a large wave, pushing its way through in a charge that could only be described as incredible. Complementing that, it imitated a whale’s spouting, with ice spouting thunderously from its hill-sized back.

“If you can’t stop it in a single hit, it will collide with us.” (Fiona)

“No worries, one hit is enough—” (Kurono)

I answered Fiona’s warning in a flat tone with no sense of impending crisis at all, getting ready to blow away that huge thing.

First of all, *Energy Charge*. With my right hand on the handle and the left one on the fore grip, in order to pour the blackening to my heart’s content with the pseudo-lightning attribute produced by the Third Divine Protection.

I could feel that it smoothly integrated thanks to the magical conduits carved inside. Of course, that was the incorporated Sloth-Gil’s skull.

While it was alive, it used to take over other people’s bodies to slothfully pass the time, now it’s the moment for it to work its fullest.

Well, speaking of working, there’s someone else that also wants to go at it.

“It’s your turn, Hitsugi, *Barrel Change*! Lightning gun formBlaster Gil Mode!”
(Kurono)

“Yeeees! Leave it to me, master!” (Hitsugi)

As the cheerful reply resounded inside my head, several black chains gushed forth from the shadow made by the long Gatling Gun. After that, their ends turned into claws similar to a bird’s talon, demonstrating Hitsugi’s motivation with a rattle.

Thanks to the Second Divine Protection’s pseudo-earth attribute, shapes other than bullets had become easier to make than ever. The claws are not only solid, their operation is smooth, and the performance is magnificent.

“You remember the procedure?” (Kurono)

“Of course! Hitsugi’s a good girl that’s always prepared!” (Hitsugi)

I received a thorough explanation from Regin-san about exchanging gun barrels, Hitsugi was trained as well, so I could do it even while in combat were both my hands were occupied.

Originally, I was doubtful whether a curse had memory and learning ability, but, since Hitsugi herself said that it was possible, we decided to give it a try.

Now, show your master the results of your training!

“Err... well, this is, hmm... Eh...” (Hitsugi)

Despite the fretting soliloquy that leaked into my head, the procedure advanced somehow.

After detaching the barrel with the six muzzles, a long barrel of high calibre emerged from the shadow to replace it. The base is the same black as the *Greed Metal*, but, similar to lighting on a dark night, faint lines of sparkling purple lightning emerged from the sides of the barrel.

This is connected to the main part and—

“Kurono-san, since it seems that you’re taking your time, should I shoot it first?” (Fiona)

“J-just give me a second.” (Kurono)

Fiona readied herself with *Spitfire* for the interception. Could it be that she has no faith in my firepower—No, this is a party and she is taking that stance to give a proper follow-up. Certainly this is done with goodwill instead of nervousness.

“Kurono-san, not yet? (Fiona)

“Hey, Hitsugi, hurry up! At this rate my spotlight will—” (Kurono)

“I did it master! Ready to fire!” (Hitsugi)

Alright, you did it! Well done Hitsugi. The gun barrel was replaced splendidly, and I just finished charging up the lightning mana. All that’s left is to pull the trigger.

There’s no need to aim. Because the approaching snow whale already decreased the distance by 50 meters. There’s no way I’ll miss such a huge target even if I shoot without using a sight.

“—*Plasma Blaster*, fire!” (Kurono)

Like that, with a triumphant look on my face, I fired my best shot.

Chapter 384: Mind Control Countermeasures

My Plasma Blaster had magnificently smashed the High Ice Elemental. The torrent of purple lightning easily pierced through the whale's body, it wasn't inferior to Lily's serious Beam at all. Rather, its huge ice body was instantly evaporated, it basically disappeared.

It was without a doubt the flashiest attack magic I had ever shown them. Personally, I didn't think I'd get *this* much power out of it without even using one of its special bullets which were made out of the Sloth Gill's fingers.

The test shot was a great success — aaand yet,

"Kurono-san, I see that you're in high spirits after shooting a somewhat flashy magic, but I do believe that you need to be better aware of your surroundings"

"I'm truly sorry"

I was now sitting on the snow, my head hung in a shameful seiza.

"What would've happened if there was someone below?"

"I got too excited, and I'm deeply reflecting on it"

I'd missed something very obvious.

Obviously, the overkill Plasma Blaster that smashed through the brittle snow whale would then explode into the snowy fields. A huge explosion, a gush of hot air. An avalanche obviously followed.

When I went, 'Ah!?' in realization, it was already too late. The snow field that seemed to be like the calm surface of a lake, came alive with a thunderous roar as billows of snow rose up. The snow surface swelled even more tempestuously than when the huge whale appeared, spouting dense, pure-white bursts of snow into the air while flowing towards the base of the mountain, simply obeying gravity.

Obviously, there'd be no way for us to stop the surging waves caused by mother nature.

Oh man, sure fucked that one up. I thought, so dumbfounded that I could only

watch as the raging avalanche rampaged downwards.

And then began Fiona's lecturing. My hype took a nose dive. This was the Hero of Iskia, a Rank 5 Adventurer. Can I cry now?

"However, you needn't to worry too much, since avalanches are quite common in winter mountain dungeons. When I journeyed solo I didn't mind causing them"

At the end of thoroughly lecturing me about not being a pain to others or adventurers' etiquette and such, Fiona nonchalantly declared so.

"Wait, you don't actually care!?"

"I'm a bit bad at controlling my magic, after all"

Fiona recounted of not only avalanches, but events such as landslides in mountain dungeons, collapsing ruins and caverns, and so on, all of them artificial calamity-class breaches of etiquette caused by her massive booms. And for some reason, she was talking about them as a matter of pride.

"Since now's a good time, I'll give it to you straight: No wonder no one partied with you"

"Right, because of that, I now try to pay attention to various things"

Aside from the danger to the party, once various cases of other adventurers and commoners getting injured by such calamities start showing up, they'd naturally receive some sort of reprimand from the guild. The party could end up being deprived of their guild cards, and worst case, jailed and subsequently sentenced to death by guillotine.

"We're getting pretty famous now too, so we have to start being more careful"

Once again reflecting on my actions, we restarted our march up the snowy mountains.

Incidentally, hunting elemental type monsters was actually unprofitable. The reason being that they vanish like mist when defeated, which meant that we couldn't collect a part that could be used as proof of subjugation.

In the case of high elementals though, they apparently did have crystallized

mana inside them, much like a slime's core, but it turned out to be impossible to collect that from the whale I beat just now. Either it got disintegrated by my plasma blast, or, if it did survive the onslaught, it'd now be far away due to the ensuing avalanche.

Not only did I lose the drop, I failed hard enough to get lectured about it too, but, I did get to test out my new toy, which makes it alright. Please, make it alright?

From there the dungeon was pretty easy. The monsters we encountered were anticipated, and none of our fights could be called difficult.

I smoothly bulldozed through any eis elemental snowmen, the winter variant dortuses were obliterated by Lily's concentrated laser fire, and the white feathered harpies were cooked into roasted chicken by Fiona.

One time when a herd of white punpuns appeared, Lily figured, 'Maybe they think I'm one of them?' and slowly tried approaching them. That, ended up with her being driven away with a cruel pelting of snowballs. Needless to say, the punpuns were soon scattered everywhere, screaming, running for their lives and going back to hide in the coniferous forest, while Lily went crazy with her laser beams.

We sort of ended up having lots of monsters show up on the way. Despite the cold, mountain range climate, monsters still somehow thrived. And those punpuns, they're supposed to be bears right? Not only were they not hibernating, they kept engaging us in snowball fights. What's up with that? I swear, there's gotta be people in costume among them.

Anyway, with so many of them, it might've been a good idea to pit Lily's Living Dead guys against them. We were attempting this quest with just the three of us so we could get there faster, and since we'd be facing the Lust Rose, a rank 5 monster with practically no info on it, I figured we should use her Servants to mind the time-consuming routine fights so we can be ready to battle the boss in peak condition.

I voiced this idea in the tent after we decided to set down camp for the night, but since our destination was virtually a stone's throw away, we decided against it.

I could sense a few monsters attempting to approach us in the night, but none of them attacked, and morning came without incident.

And the next day, the 24th of Frozen Soil, today was the day we would dive into the cave that housed the Lust Rose.

“Oh yeah, you said you fought succubi before, right Fiona?”

“Yes, a few times. Though rarely, they did appear in the ruins type dungeons of Sinclair”

Just like how goblins or orcs, creatures only known in fantasy back on Earth, were commonly found in this world, the Succubus, a monster that inspired the male wonder and tickled at their hearts, existed as well.

What’s more, they even took the form of beautiful young women and the part about needing male semen? Had that too.

“While succubi have enough Charm to induce seduction on women too, the effect is greatly diminished compared to when they use it on men, so they weren’t that hard to beat. They’d run away as soon as they realized that I wasn’t falling under their control”

Succubi were known to be much more intelligent than the average wild monster in that they had the ability to avoid mindlessly attacking their prey. They were ranked 4 in difficulty by the guild.

Any news of them appearing would apparently cause dumb adventurers (male) to rush to the location, resulting in meaningless casualties. Every time.

“Mind control huh, I had my share of that stuff cast on me, but I still don’t really get it”

This also happened back in my human experiment days. I was, unfortunately, never tested against an actual succubus, but did face monsters like wraiths that used magic to try and mess up my senses, or manipulate my mind or other bizarre mind-fuckery.

Though there was the fact that those effects were never strong enough to make me unable to fight so I one-shot them all with pile-bunkers.

“All attacks on the mind, or those that have a noticeable effect at least, are

categorized under mind control. They're a type of negative status effect that include Charm or Dominate and the like. They're best known for causing forced nightmares or illusions on the target"

Most of these mental attacks were actually weak to outside interference. Let's take the example of forced nightmares. Even if it's cast on you, a party member can easily snap you out of it through a bit of nudging or splashing water on your face.

This'd be harder if the mind control is cast alongside a Siesta spell, but there were still ways around.

"What about Parasites?"

"They act similar to the type of mind control that manipulate the target's body, but are actually categorized separately. Kurono-san, you said that the Sloth Gill itself went inside your body right? That type of control is magnitudes higher than any mind control"

"Yeah, I didn't think I could get out of that one with force of will alone"

"The mental barriers in Kurono's head are a lot harder to crack than the average Joe's. If he couldn't do it, I have no doubt it was strong. No wonder it was classed rank 5"

Lily suddenly joined the conversation, now in her adult mind mode. Maybe she was feeling a bit left out, she asserted that she was there too by tightly hugging the sleeve of my coat.

So cute, no uh, I was just about to ask her on something anyway.

"What about telepathy, also mind control?"

"It's one of the fundamental forms actually. Don't you hear stories about how past traumas are pulled back to the surface?"

Indeed, fiona nodded. I personally hadn't experienced it, but it wasn't hard to imagine. It sounds horrible. Especially for me, as I'd lived a long time undergoing cruel human experimentation and was made to kill my fellow countrymen. I *really* don't want to get hit by one of those.

"You can do that, Lily?"

“I can’t, no. I do have high telepathic ability, but I didn’t specialize in that sort of usage. I can mostly read people’s emotions and look into their memories”

I mean, that’s nothing to scoff at. It’s like you have no privacy at all.

“Don’t worry, I can’t read your mind since your inherent barriers are so strong, and Fiona has Mind Protect active too”

“No well, I trust you, so I wouldn’t mind you reading me”

“*Ufufu*, thanks!!”

Lily hugged me from the side. She was adorable even in her adult mind mode. The rabbit ears on her hood were fluttering around too.

“But I’m still worried, you can’t actually see these attacks coming after all”

“We’ve done all we can to prepare for them, so thinking too much on it now is pointless”

Thinking, *maybe if we had Nell*, was probably too selfish of me. Regardless, Fiona was right, we had prepared to the best of our ability.

The Lust Rose has been killing adventurers left and right never once showing itself. Even when Jimmy-san first found the cave, the party of three he was guiding never said they were being attacked.

So I could imagine the monster having very high stealth capabilities. Strong enough to approach enemies without them noticing when their minds start getting played with.

“The problem with practically using mind control is that the spell caster needs to be very close to the target for it to take hold”

Mind control spells, like any other attack magic, could only induce a negative status on the target if it hits. Whether it be in liquid form like a sort of poison, or unseen like telepathy, the magic had to have a medium through which it would reach out and clash into the target.

The pink gas that the Lust Rose seems to release inside the cave was precisely that medium. Although, the reports did say that adventurers would go mad before the gas came into play, so it could also be a catalyst to strengthen the effects of the actual mind control spell.

“If we use my instincts and Lily’s telepathy, there’s no way it can close in on us without notice... right?”

Even if it could stealth as well as Sue-san, it likely still won’t avoid detection if we go full alert mode. Otherwise, if it has some sort of scifi optical camouflage, or even abilities that masked its presence from all 5 senses, my gut instincts won’t be fooled so easily.

“There’s also the issue where we might get caught in its control the instant we see it”

And we were also expecting the Lust Rose to use this sort of ability.

Other than mind control spells that needed to travel and hit, there were also hypnosis techniques that used visual or auditory cues that induced illusions or suggestions on the target.

If something like a camera flash can send us all to dream land instantly, we could all get done in by that instant surprise attack.

The worst possibility was if it was an instant effect sound type hypnotism. Though since this *was* a rank 5 monster, it should be prudent to expect that much.

“I bet the actual fight will end in an instant”

Basically, this was our strategy: First, Lily and I were to concentrate hard on sensing it as it approached. The moment one of us felt something off, we’d get Fiona to blast in that direction.

This didn’t insure that we’d hit it in one shot, but we were basically attempting to pile on the attacks so we hit the Lust Rose before it can get to us.

Since it was specialized in mental attacks, the Lust Rose itself should be weak. Succubi, who could be classified as beings with high mana like elves or vampires, were also like this, strong in their domination spells while their offensive spells went up to mid tier at most. That level of damage was nothing to the three of us, and if it came with a frontal assault, we’d happily take it down.

“—Ah! Kurono, there’s the cave!”

Lily who'd taken the lead, skating lightly across the snowfield with her Fairy Dance Shoes, reported that she'd discovered the target location.

With snow coming up to my knees, I also came beside Lily and looked to where she was pointing.

Over there was a wide vertical cliff-face standing firmly as if to block our path. The view was quite suitable for a snowy mountain range like this, with ice and snow completely shielding its surface. But we weren't here to sight see.

The cave was right there too. It wasn't big or small, and didn't look any different from a normal one, but this was it. This was the only hole I could see going into the cliff.

The map we had also confirmed this sheer cliff as the correct location. This was where we would find the Lust Rose.

"Let's head in then"

Chapter 385: Cave of Thorns

Similar to when we went exploring ruins, Fiona's Torch spell and Lily's Oracle Field lit up the innards of the dark cave.

Its walls now visible under the lumination of fire and fairy magic, we found the cave riddled in thorny vines, running every which way. We knew about this from Jimmy-san's info, but knowing didn't alleviate the bad itch I was feeling.

"These things aren't gonna come alive and whip at us right?"

"They certainly look like they could, but as far as we know, they won't"

These, very obviously, out of place vines lining the cave walls were apparently nothing to worry about.

Jimmy-san and the investigation team he led had taken samples of this plant back to analyze, but had found no abnormalities. Apparently, it wasn't physically possible for these vines to move like tentacles or something, as their internal structure didn't allow for it.

Well, that'd be where magic came into play. Like my Sword Arts, inanimate things could be easily controlled via magical enchantment.

But then again, there was also the fact that going to the trouble of moving around these thorny vines wouldn't work to deal us any damage. Never mind Fiona, even I had enough fire magic to burn these away.

"Perhaps the Lust Rose is growing them as a hobby?"

"A monster with hobbies? Is that even possible?"

"When they're intelligent to a degree, anything can happen"

And here I thought she was joking.

Even if it wasn't doing this as a passive interest, it could be growing these for some other reason. If there were ants that cultivated mushrooms as food, it wasn't so far-fetched that a moderately intelligent monster was growing vines, ploughing a farm or even dabbling in a bit of gardening.

The danger looked minimal, but I'll keep an eye out on the off chance they do

start moving.

We kept walking deeper and deeper, twisted vines all around.

“Nothing but these vines here huh——”

I hadn’t sensed anything as of yet. The scenery looked so monotone that I began to doubt whether we were really moving forward.

“Ah, Kurono, look, the way splits here~”

The first change in anything came after Lily, who was walking ahead and lighting our way, reported a fork in the path.

“Huh, well, they did tell us this was here”

The passage was cleanly split in 2, both left and right paths curving slightly, in a way that shining a light through wouldn’t show too far ahead.

“Right, this is where it gets serious”

Any adventurer that went past this branching point had began losing it, ending up victims to the Lust Rose. Once inside, we’ll be in enemy territory, where the Lust Rose could attack any time. We were about to enter a rank 5 danger zone.

“I’m on vanguard, Fiona’s middle, and Lily, you’re at the back”

“Roger that”

“kaay!”

I thought we could use the Living Dead to take my role, positioning ourselves further away in a wait and see approach, but there was a chance that the Lust Rose could hijack the homunculi and turn them against us. We decided to avoid that can of worms.

According to little girl mode Lily, they were still in the post-production stage, as in, not going to be useful for this job. No helping that.

“OK, let’s head in”

We’d now finally stepped into the forked path.

I chose to go right. No particular reason, just a feeling. Plus, there was no real

way of knowing what difference awaited us in the different paths, since no adventurer that'd gone past this point had returned alive. It really didn't matter whether we took our time choosing carefully, or just picked a random path.

"... Doesn't look all that different"

The cave, now after the branching point, looked pretty much the same, in height, in width, and even in the ups and downs. The thorned vines all along the walls also remained, of course. And we still hadn't sensed any abnormalities.

"Hm, that's—"

Just then, I saw something shine under the light of the Torch floating beside me.

After moving closer, still on alert for any presences, I quickly figured out who it was.

"Isn't this the Golden Hero Michael?"

He was an ice statue in brilliant, golden, full plate mail armor. More precisely, he was encased in a block of ice, like Saeed of the Evileyes. That man I'd once fought at the Curse Carnival was also similarly sealed in ice.

But Michael here won't be coming to life if we decide to melt him out of his prison. Mostly because on the other side of his helmet's visor, which had been lifted up, I could only see bone.

Not too far away, we also found his companions, the mage in a robe and a stout archer holding a bow, both of them, also iced skeletons.

These three must've been the party called Golden Age, the one Jimmy-san mentioned, the first victims of the Lust Rose.

"... This is strange, if they'd only been encased in ice, they wouldn't decompose into bones"

Fiona's concern was plenty warranted, now that I thought on it. Even if they weren't especially trapped with ice element sealing magic, they were still encased so cleanly that I doubted if their bodies would completely decompose this fast.

"Maybe they were drained?"

Little girl Lily came up with the answer in a snap.

“That makes sense, which would mean, the Lust Rose froze them and then started absorbing their life force”

“So they got iced, all while in some pleasant dream?”

That’d explain a lot of things. Michael here had apparently been saying something about his ‘mommy’ all the way until his communication signal was cut for good. If they were being slowly and gradually frozen over while still under the illusions of mind control, it wouldn’t count as enough of an external force and they wouldn’t wake from it.

Actually, since the Lust Rose was dwelling in these frigid mountains, there was always a big chance that its inherent magic, Extra magic, was ice attribute. And looking further at what I know about the other trial monsters and their elements, ice was the only one left by elimination.

First, since I already had fire, earth, and lightning, they’re obviously out. Then, according to the documents I read up in the guild, the Pride Gem, Gluttony Oct and Envy Rei were water, wind and light, respectively. Not much was known about the Lust Rose so I couldn’t determine its element at the time, but thinking in terms of my trials, there’s no way it *wasn’t* the ice element trial monster.

Whatever, not like knowing this will give us any advantage, and nor will it change what we had to do. We had to subjugate the Lust Rose. Only after that could the guild come in and collect the bodies of these three. Our mission’s success would also serve the purpose of giving them a proper burial.

And then, after we’d walked another 10 minutes or so,

“There sure are a lot of them”

Skeletons in ice were dotted all over inside the passage of thorny vines.

They must’ve all been pretty high ranked adventurers; I could tell that all their armors and robes were high quality from a glance. And, none looked like they had a hard fight, they all had zero injuries as they remained as statues.

“They too must’ve thought up many countermeasures against the monster,

and yet still failed”

“And look, our mind controller isn’t partial to people either”

“Ah~, I spot a punpun~”

There were some non-humanoid bodies mixed in too. Lily pointed out a large, white boss punpun that had a long gash along one eye and had its paws raised up in an intimidating pose. It looked a lot like a stuffed bear exhibit.

“This guy isn’t a skeleton, you think it doesn’t eat monsters?”

“It’s likely kept this as reserve food. If you look around, you can see that there are monster skeletons here and there”

She was right, from a quick glance, I found what looked to be a wolf skeleton, also encased in a block of ice. On further looking around, I spotted one of a harpy too. Though, there wasn’t anything as big as a dortus, those just wouldn’t fit in here.

Given all that, the Lust Rose looked to have no problem preying on man and monster alike, first planting them under mind control and later draining them to the bone. The way this monster operated, what with lying in wait inside its cave, it was very similar to a spider’s web or an antlion’s death trap.

Could we really avoid being ensnared into this unseen mind control and draw out the reclusive monster responsible...? I was suddenly struck by this vague sense of doubt.

“... This doesn’t feel right”

“Did you sense something?”

“No, it’s not that, but well...”

I focused hard on it, but no, there was no trace of any presence, nor anything out of the norm. Only the thorned vines along the walls, and the many bodies in ice. Nothing else but the three of us showed any movement.

“What about you, Lily?”

“Hn~, nothing he~re?”

So nothing of note. That’s a double confirmation. But what’s with this

turbulent unease in my chest?

“Dammit... Something, there’s gotta be something we missed...”

A bead of sweat flowed down my cheek. My sense of discomfort was only worsening.

“But you said you didn’t sense anything, no?”

Fiona also had a point. We hadn’t.

“Do you think we should retrace our steps for now?”

“... No, we’ll proceed”

I didn’t think we’d gain anything new going back and trying again. Right now, I just wanted to do something about this doubt, this unease; I had to know what was causing this.

“Let’s keep going, but a little slower, so we can pay better attention”

The girls seemed OK with that, so we continued exploring.

But, as before, no change. For all our progression through the cave, the same pattern just went on and on, as if mocking me for worrying so much. The only sounds were those of our footsteps, and the only things keeping us company were the occasional person or monster encased in ice. The thorned vines also still covered the walls, their density never increasing or decreasing, and I couldn’t see a single flower blooming on them. Actually, I didn’t know if this species even had flowers.

It was all so monotone, I was starting to get bored when,

“Oh, cave splits here”

We’d arrived upon our second fork in the road. It was like the first one, split cleanly into a left and right path. Actually, it was the exact same.

Well, the rest of the cave looked the same, so why not the forks too?

“Which way, Kurono-san?”

“Left”

“Any reason?”

“Just a feeling”

Yup, just a baseless feeling. Fiona and Lily didn't seem to mind, so we'll be entering left.

“OK, let's head in”

We stepped into the forked path.

I chose to go left. No particular reason, just a feeling. Plus, there was no real way of knowing what difference awaited us in the different paths, since no adventurer that'd gone past this point had returned alive. It really didn't matter whether we took our time choosing carefully, or just picked a random path.

“... Doesn't look all that different”

The cave, now after the branching point, looked pretty much the same, in height, in width, and even in the ups and downs. The thorned vines all along the walls also remained, of course. And we still hadn't sensed any abnormalities.

“Hm, that's— —”

Just then, I saw something shine under the light of the Torch floating beside me.

After moving closer, still on alert for any presences, I quickly figured out who it was.

“Isn't this the Golden Hero Michael?”

The golden armored warrior was trapped in ice like Saeed.

“... This is strange, if they'd only been encased in ice, they wouldn't decompose into bones”

“Maybe they were drained?”

I was convinced by Lily's instant deduction.

“So they got iced, all while in some pleasant dream?”

As I thought, the Lust Rose had ice type Extra magic.

Whatever, not like knowing this will give us any advantage. We should carry on ahead.

And then, after we'd walked another 10 minutes or so,

"There sure are a lot of them"

Skeletons in ice were dotted all over inside the passage of thorny vines.

"They too must've thought up many countermeasures against the monster, and yet still failed"

"And look, our mind controller isn't partial to people either"

"Ah~, I spot a punpun~"

Lily proclaimed as she pointed at a boss-pun, which looked a lot like a stuffed bear exhibit.

"This guy isn't a skeleton, you think it doesn't eat monsters?"

"It's likely kept this as reserve food. If you look around, you can see that there are monster skeletons here and there"

"Oh yeah, it's kinda like a spider's web or antlion's death trap. The thing's got no problem preying on man and monster alike"

And so, we only kept walking.

Somehow, I didn't feel anything amiss. Maybe with everything so monotone, I was letting my guard down. Better fix that.

"Oh, cave splits here"

We'd arrived upon our second fork in the road after a while.

"Which way, Kurono-san?"

"Left"

"Any reason?"

"Just a feeling"

Yup, just a baseless feeling. Fiona and Lily didn't seem to mind, so we'll be entering left.

"OK, let's head in——"

Chapter 386: The Continuation of that Day

“...nnn.”

Someone was calling me.

“...kunnnnn.”

It was the kind, flowing voice of a young girl. Ah, I doubted there was any man who would not answer to having his name called by such a beautiful voice.

I needed to get up. As I slept warmly, my conscious made the decision to wake up.

“...Kurono-kun.”

What appeared before my eyes, was the familiar face of a girl. There was a tinge of sadness in her round, black eyes. She had a small, pretty nose and soft cherry blossom colored lips. Her flaxen long hair enhanced her pale skin.

She was so beautiful as if she were charmed. My sleepy eyes were rudely glued to her face. Perhaps I had already been charmed.

“Kurono-kun, are you alright? You were groaning so much...”

Her face looked like it was ready to burst into tears at any moment. When I saw her expression crumble, full of distress and sadness, I immediately felt a certain panic rise within me. I did not want to make her cry.

“No, I am fine. It’s really nothing, so don’t worry about me...Shirazaki.”

“...Oh, that’s good.”

Her face expressed a relief that came from the bottom of her heart. The girl’s name was Yuriko Shirazaki. She was a fellow clubmate at the literature club. I was sad, I think. We were no more to each other, no less.

“By the way, where...am I?”

Apparently, I was currently on a soft bed and covered with clean, white blankets so that I could rest. Shirazaki was sitting on a folding chair near me, peering into my face.

I looked to the right and left and saw the waves of a white curtain hanging from a rail surrounding my bed. Peeking passed a gap in the curtains I could see the familiar and annoying sliding door and in the corner, there was a scale and height meter set.

Additionally, I could see a simple analog clock of practical design hanging on the wall. The time was 6:38. It was just near sunset and the whole room was bathed in the reddish light of the setting sun that shone through the curtains.

Even though I had been the one to ask the question, I could tell at a glance where this room was.

“It’s the school infirmary.”

I thought so, well, there was no other explanation. I had never actually had to use it, but I had come here for special cleaning duties at least.

But why was I sleeping here? It was strange. I could not help but be overcome with a strong feeling of unease.

Calm down, try to remember. Just a moment ago I was...

“I was really shocked when you just fainted in the club room out of nowhere. I were really close to calling an ambulance you know.”

“Ah...ah, that’s right. Now I remember. I had felt a sensation like a massive headache and just fell over right there...that was it.”

“Do you still feel unwell? The school nurse said that it was just low blood pressure, that you would be fine once you had some rest...”

“No, I don’t feel any pain anywhere. I’m really okay now.”

I said it as if I was hiding, but in reality, I really did not feel any abnormalities. The problem was the discrepancy with my memory, I don’t know... I do clearly remember fainting in the literature club room. I do remember that, but I couldn’t help but feel as if it were something that had happened a very long time ago.

“...I have this feeling like I’ve had the longest dream.”

“Don’t worry. You’re awake now, that bad dream that was making you groan is now over.”

A bad dream. Was that what it was.

Bad things, painful things... No, it wasn't anything so simple as that. I feel like I had experienced being on the brink of death, and that I had also felt a harsher despair than death, many times over.

It was like I had dark and black emotions of chaos deep inside of my chest. Not just my heart, it was a part of my body. The pain and bitterness, the despair of defeat, humiliation, and loss.

If my heart and body had so permanently experienced these emotions, it could only mean that I had been having the most unimaginable nightmare.

However...

"There should have been something...something I was not supposed to forget, something very important."

"What is it? What do you mean?"

Shirazaki's black eyes looked straight into me. Usually, she would be intimidated by my aggressive attitude and never look me in the eye. But right now she had the gentle look of a mother looking after her own child.

"It's, it is..."

"It's?"

I could not take my eyes off her. It was as if her eyes were sucking me in. Like I was being sucked into the abyss.

"...I don't know."

I tried to put it into words, into shapes, that memory that was supposed to be important to me. But it scattered like a cloud that could never be grasped.

"Hehe, it was a dream you were having just a moment ago. But you can't remember it all now that you're awake, that happens sometimes, huh?"

"Yeah...it does."

Yes. In the first place, I don't even have memories. I fainted from low blood pressure and then I woke up. There was only sleep in between, I myself had not taken any actions. Dreams were only an organizing of memories, something

that happens to the body. One of the mechanisms of the living.

“But, Kurono-kun. Do you remember what happened before you fainted?”

Before I fainted? I guess she meant what happened in the club room.

I’m sure I had arrived at the club room like any other day... No, that was wrong. Shirazaki had gone out of her way to talk with me and said:

“There is an important meeting at the club today...so be sure to come, okay.”

And when I did arrive at the club room, Shirazaki who had delivered the message was the only one there.

No matter how long we waited, the other club members did not come. There was an awkward silence as the time ticked away. I didn’t want things to continue like that, so I made the decision to talk to her, but failed. I kept trying different things and then... Ahh, now that I think of it, she said this one thing:

“When I said that there would be a meeting, I lied.”

Yes, she did say that.

“...and, that is all I remember. I think that you were about to continue from there, only that is when I fainted.”

“Good, I’m glad you remembered that.”

If I had not remembered at least that much, it would mean that I was showing signs of memory loss. It was a pretty awful headache, but I don’t think it was that major. In that sense, I too was happy that I had ‘remembered that.’

“So, why did you lie to bring me to the club room?”

“I really wanted to be alone with you there.”

I had thought she was going to say something about how they had all planned to play a prank on me. Her unexpected answer left me scrambling for a reply.

“Is, is that right...”

I returned vaguely, the empty words escaping my mouth like I was an idiot.

But Shirazaki did not appear to be bothered by my confusion and she continued to speak as she looked straight into my eyes.

“Yes. And thankfully, we are alone together again. I can continue what I was going to say.”

Perhaps it was the light of the setting sun that was shining into the room, but her face looked slightly red. Her beautiful smile threatened to captivate me, but I kept my ears perked so as to not miss a single word that came out of her mouth.

“The thing is, Kurono-kun...”

I didn’t get a headache. This time I was able to hear all of what she had to say.

“...I like you.”

It was a confession. It was straight emotion, there was no roundabout way of saying it, no embarrassment. Even the most dimwitted person could not hear this and realize that it was a confession.

“Uh...really....me?”

But, I could not believe it. It was too much to believe.

The sudden confession, and from a completely unexpected person. And I was not so conceited as to easily accept that her affections for me were real.

This was Shirazaki. I could understand her being angry with me, hating me. If anything, that is what I had been assuming all of this time.

More than anything, I had never done anything that would make her fall for me. Our only conversations were of official matters concerning the club or talking on the behalf of other members. Of course, we also never experienced any beautiful events where I could expect the suspension bridge effect to occur.

And while it did seem incredibly rude to be suspicious of a girls confession of affection, I could still not believe it, yet...

“Mm!?”

“...Mmm.”

I felt something soft touch my lips. Warmth. There was now zero distance from Shirazaki’s beauty and my face, there was a faint scent of shampoo on her.

I was being kissed.

“I like you, Kurono-kun. I’m not lying.”

Before I knew it she had drawn back to her previous distance from me. That moment just now had felt like a dream. But, it wasn’t a lie. Like she said.

“So, please...be my boyfriend.”

I need to reject her...some intuition in me said. It was not that I still doubted her affections, I no longer assumed that there was something behind it all.

But I just did not have the right. I should not date girls, I should not have any lovers. Such thoughts had suddenly entered my consciousness.

However, at the same time, I also think this: I do not have anyone that I love so strongly that I would offer my body and soul to, and I was no saint who completely shunned all relationships. I was just an ordinary high school student with questionable looks. Why was I thinking about such idiotic things as whether or not I had the right.

Shirazaki herself had confessed to me. I doubt there was a single boy in Sakuragi Highschool that would reject her. Even if they already had a girlfriend, they would probably dump her in a heartbeat.

No, no. This sensation had nothing to do with all that. It was much deeper, from somewhere in my heart there was a distant memory, it pleads with me desperately...

“...I guess that’s a...no.”

“Yes. If you’ll have me.”

My lame and disturbing feelings were immediately blown away when I saw her tragic face about to crumble. How could I have been bothered by such insignificant and boring things.

It was just not possible for me to allow her to cry.

“Really? Are you really sure about this?”

“Yeah, I look forward to being with you, Shirazaki!”

“Thank you! Kurono-kun!”

And just like that, she had pounced on me to give me a hug. I sensed her

warmth and scent once again, and my heart began to beat faster.

What a comfortable weight this was. After a moment's hesitation, I wrapped both of my arms around her.

"Kurono-kun, I love you."

And so I had my first girlfriend ever. An incredibly beautiful girl named Yuriko Shirazaki.

It seemed that this day would be the peak of my life.

Chapter 387: Lily's Happiness

"...Lily."

I hear a voice. A voice calling my name.

Who-, it was obvious who it was. That low male voice that reached my ears, it was from the person I loved more than anyone, more than anything.

As soon as I thought this, my conscious awoke. My eyelids sprang wide open.

"...Mmm."

It was so bright. But my eyes quickly adjusted.

And what my eyes then took in, was a sight that was very familiar to me. Not just his form standing in front of me, but even the room I was in.

Nothing was strange, everything that entered my vision was in its right place. Even then, I felt a faint sense of unease.

"Huh...Kurono, why..."

Kurono. Even after inspecting him up and down, I could not point out anything unordinary. Both of his eyes and his hair were black, proof that he was an outsider. What he wore over his tall frame was the jet black robe, 'Bahamut's Embrace.' The trademark of black mages.

"You're...here?"

This place, yes, it was my home. It was a place I spent thirty years in after being run out of the Light Fountain. It was a small cottage built quietly in the Fairy Garden.

Kurono was standing in front of the table in the middle of the room. I was now sitting up on the bed in the corner.

"Are you still tired? Should I not have woken you?"

"...No, it's fine."

I didn't feel any annoyance at being awakened. I had just dozed off. And either way, I could not be mad at Kurono, even if he had woken me up in the

middle of the night. No matter how small the reason was.

“I wish I could tell you to take it easy, but today is the one day that I really need your help.”

So saying, Kurono took a step towards me, and before I knew it he had picked me up. It seemed that my weight did not matter to Kurono, whether I was in the form of a child or in my true form as I now was.

His strong arms carried me into the air as if I weighed almost nothing.

“Ahh!?”

I was suddenly pressed against his chest. Being held like a princess. It all happened so suddenly that I let out a weird gasp. I was embarrassed, but... I was also grinning from happiness. My cheeks grew hot.

“Or I could just carry you to the village like this. If you want to sleep more?”

He added that there was no guarantee that the ride would be comfortable, and gave me a wicked smile. I no longer had the consciousness of a child, and such seductions in my current state were hard to resist.

“I, I’m...fine. Really.”

I sounded shrill. I knew at that moment that I went red in the face. Even someone as insensitive as Kurono would see that.

“But, you haven’t gotten off yet.”

“It’s because you haven’t let me.”

“Can I?”

“...No.”

My, my, his expression seemed to say as he chuckled. Kurono started to walk as he continued to carry me in his arms. Ahh, I was so happy. But, somewhere in the corner of my brain, I think: more, I want more.

“But I will let you down before we reach the village. We can show them how close we are tomorrow.”

But why tomorrow? What happens tomorrow? Before I could ask this, Kurono began to answer.

“After all, tomorrow is our wedding.”

“...Huh?”

Exactly one year ago, on the fourth day of the month of early summer.

The piercing screech of the monster bird Garuda had echoed throughout the forest. A moment later a large wooden box fell from the sky. The box had fallen from the edge of a cliff, and it shattered into pieces when it hit the ground. What spilled out were the apples that had filled the box, and one man.

I was still a child with a simple mind. I woke him up with the rough method of splashing water onto his face with a cup I created out of magic. Even then I was still thinking that I was nursing him back to health. In my childlike way.

In any case, that is how I met him.

“My name is the Black Demon King. What’s yours?”

Black Demon King. That’s what it sounded like to me, but correctly, the man’s name was ‘Kurono Maou.’

I don’t know why I started calling him Kurono, there was no deep thought behind it. After all, I had just taken to calling him ‘Kurono’ since I was a child. It was only during my first full moon when I understood that there was a difference between a first and last name. But at that point, Kurono’s name was Kurono to me, and he himself went by the name ‘Kurono’ in the village.

His real name, ‘Maou,’ which had a similar ring to Demon King, need only be known to friends who he shared this secret with. Yes, just me. For now and forever.

Kurono had trust in me. I too trusted Kurono. And I love him. And he loves me.

And so tomorrow, exactly one year since we first met, I and Kurono will be married.

The venue will, of course, be Irz village. Where we lived quietly, peacefully in gentle warmth for the past year.

“Oh, good morning Kurono and Lily! You sure are making a show this morning!”

We were walking with our hands in each other's, and Vartz, the first goblin farmer to see us approaching the village, jeered as he watched.

I started to feel a little embarrassed, and I found myself squeezing Kurono's hand tightly. But at the same time, I was so happy that I felt like my face would distort from the grinning.

"We'll give them a bigger show tomorrow, won't we Lily?"

"...Yes."

I must have been so smitten that my face had become quite foolish looking.

"Good morning, ah... Lily, you seem on top of the world this morning."

It was Grint, leader of the vigilante group that protected the Irz gates today. As a lizardman, he wasn't supposed to have the variation in facial expressions as the other races with human-like faces, but even so, he was pretty close.

Indeed, my face had gotten so red and I had continued grinning, it was as if my emotions were a chaos of happiness that displayed on my face. I knew this was true, but I could not stop myself.

"Good morning, Kurono! Ah, as always, the sight of you and Lily walking and holding hands, it's positively criminal!"

"Shut up, Nyarko. Do your job."

When we reached the adventurers guild, Nyarko began in her usual light-hearted way as soon as we opened the door. At first, I had my reservations about this cat daughter who acted so familiarly around Kurono, but now I did not care at all. After all, I was Kurono's number one. He loved me more than any other woman.

"Heey, Kurono."

"Nino, you're back."

Nino was the leader of Irz village's only exclusive party, 'Irz Blader'. He appeared to have been eating breakfast with his men before they started to walk towards us.

"Yeah, we managed to get back last night. Look at us, just in time for the

ceremony, eh?”

“Thank you. I’ll increase the reward.”

“Hehe, I would hope so!”

We had gone out of our way to call a priest from the Pandora Temple in the Daidalos capital, just for tomorrow’s ceremony. The Irz Blader’s had accepted the quest of escorting the priest to the village safely.

Up until a year ago, everyone had thought of them as a young and unreliable party. But then Kurono appeared as a rival, and this ended up having a good effect on both parties, now they were impressive rank three adventurers.

By the way, I and Kurono are rank two. If we wanted, we could easily go and capture a salamander from the Galahad mountain ranges and raise our rank to a five. But we did not have any ambitions of becoming stronger or becoming famous. We just wanted to live peacefully and enjoy life as adventurers.

“I guess you two are going to start living together as a couple now, huh... Hahaha!”

Ohh, this was embarrassing. I think as I start to pet the fat cat who lay in a ball in a corner of the lobby. I don’t know how long the cat has been here, but playing with it has become a habit for me. Even when I was a child, I felt like I could be myself with it.

“...Lily, I heard that the wedding dress arrived at the goods store. We should go and check.”

“Sure!”

This time he grabbed my arm and we basically flew out of the guild house.

As the double doors opened, a black shadow appeared in front of us. No, it wasn’t a black shadow, it was just someone who was dressed completely in black.

The person was wrapped in a high-grade magical robe covered in feathers. But the most distinctive thing about the person’s appearance was the large triangular hat. ‘Ainz Broom’, her favorite staff was gripped tightly in her hand.

“Good morning, Kurono and Lily.”

“Morning, Fiona.”

I greeted my friend whose eyes always looked sleepy.

“I’ve just returned to the village.”

“So, are you actually sleepy right now?”

“Yes. I intend to go and sleep in my guild room now. After I eat breakfast, of course.”

“You have not changed at all.”

I was half exasperated and half impressed. This witch had not changed at all since the time I first met her. Even though she was a rank five adventurer now.

“Speaking of which, I didn’t have a chance to say it as I was on a pretty long quest, but...”

Perhaps the gentle spring sunlight was too much for her sleepy eyes because she then lowered the brim of her hat with her left hand. I noticed that there was no ring on her ring finger. It bothered me a little.

“...congratulations on getting married.”

But that unease was blown away by her heartfelt blessing.

She was usually quite expressionless, but there was a faint smile on her face. There was nothing hidden behind her words. The natural telepathy conveyed was proof of it.

In the first place, what reason did I have to doubt her? Fiona was my very best friend.

And so I gave her my biggest smile and replied,

“Thank you, Fiona.”

Before I knew it, it had become night time.

I was together in bed with Kurono. Ever since the day we met, we’ve always slept together. Of course, it was just sleeping.

But I was no longer a child. I would never return to being a child.

When was it that I received the divine blessing from the fairy queen Iris? I

don't remember, but because of it, I am now able to stay in my true form forever. I was also able to make peace with the fairies of the Light Fountain. This was all an unmistakable truth.

The dress that had arrived at the goods store was created by them. It was a pure white dress that shone and sparkled, hehe, I looked forward to wearing it tomorrow.

"Hey, Kurono...I'm so happy."

"Ah, I am too, Lily."

Kurono's large hand gently rubbed my cheek. It was warm, it tickled, I felt like I would melt.

"This isn't a dream, is it?"

"It's not a dream."

I was so happy and fulfilled that it made me scared.

"Everyone, no, the whole world has blessed us. From now on, I want you to live with me in peaceful tranquility."

"Yes...yes, I would be happy if I could just stay with you forever."

Me too, Kurono says as he pulls me to him. I pull him back; his large body.

"We have an early morning tomorrow. Let's get some sleep."

"Yes."

"Good night, Lily."

I was enveloped in warmth and happiness, and in that, I gently let go of my consciousness.

"Good night...Kurono..."

Ahh, I pray that these happy days continue forever...

Chapter 388: Fiona's Happiness

"Hahh..."

A small yawn escapes my lips as I sluggishly get out of my bed.

I can hear winter footsteps during this time of the day. It took a bit of reasoning to get me out of my warm bed, but the stimulating smell of spices had caused my conscious to choose to be awake. No desire to sleep could defeat my appetite.

I had no regrets leaving the bed behind me as I moved towards the smell, my stomach grumbling as I walked.

It was not a very large apartment room, and the kitchen was right in front of me. And there was a man standing there; cooking. To me, his back looked like it was shining.

As a woman, I was slightly taller than average, but he was so tall that I had to look up to face him. His broad and powerful back was distinguishable as that of a first-rate warrior or knight. Even a child would be able to tell. In fact, he was much more. He was a berserker. First-rate warriors would flee before him.

And now, that back which held such superhuman strength was bare without even a single shirt to cover it.

His back was like steel, like armor made of muscle. Looking at him, I had to swallow down my saliva for reasons that had nothing to do with the cooking.

Just like a male adventurer who is lured towards a succubus, I find myself wobbling towards him. If he wasn't wearing his favorite underwear of black dragon leather either, if his lower half was naked as well, I might have dashed forward and jumped on him.

In any case, I would reach him quickly in this small room. I would be at a distance where my hand could reach, and then a distance where our skin touches.

There is no hesitation or modesty. I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around him, just like I had wanted to.

“Good morning, Kurono.”

“Morning, Fiona. I’m almost finished here, just wait a moment.”

“Sure.”

“...I suppose you aren’t going to let me go then.”

I imagine him smiling. I wish that I could see it, but I didn’t want to leave his back, my cheek against his. I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to, there was nothing to be done about it.

“I’ll wait patiently.”

“That’s not the problem. It’ll burn if I can’t move.”

“Meat tastes better if its a little burnt.”

“You’ll get something more than just well done.”

“That’s quite a predicament.”

“Anyway, you should go change. You’re too tempting when you are naked.”

Yet he’s seen me naked plenty of times. Kurono could be cute when he says such innocent things.

There was no getting around it, I agreed and begrudgingly untangled my witch’s embrace.

Nightmare let out a frightening and healthy neigh once again as I and Kurono rode together, gallantly making our way to the Academy.

Now we were heroes that everyone in Spada knew about, the ‘Nightmare Berserker’ and the witch. We made such a great couple, the looks of jealousy that the other students threw at us felt good. It was nice to have our relationship accepted by everyone.

We left Mary in the stables and headed for the classroom, hand in hand. Our fingers entangled, what I like to call the lovers tangle. I didn’t want to let go of him for a second. I think this, but reality won’t allow it. But it was alright, I was a woman who could wait.

I let go of him with a little regret and sat in the chair next to his. The adventurer’s course had free seating at least. Even if a seat was already

occupied, the students were understanding enough to give me their set. It is very important to be able to read the situation.

And so, what starts next is a low-level lesson on modern magic that was not even fitting for a refresher. Of course, in terms of my school record, I had already graduated Elysion Magic Academy as a top student, and that was the highest educational institution in all of the Sinclair Republic. So there was no lesson in any renowned school that did not seem familiar to me.

I was not here to learn something anyway. My purpose is to help him, he who came from a far away country known as 'Nihon,' so he can learn about this world.

"Hey, Fiona, this technique here..."

"You need to squeeze here, and push here, then it should turn correctly."

"I see. Thank you, Fiona. You make it easy to understand."

No, no, you are too kind. This was nothing for me, a witch.

Apparently, Kurono had something called a 'transword' ingrained directly inside of his head that made it hard for him to understand certain chants and terms or proper nouns. And so my support during magic classes was invaluable.

It is a wonderful thing to be of use to the person that you love.

"...Now, what should we do for lunch?"

Kurono asked as heard the dragons roar coming from my stomach. The lunch break bell had just been rung.

"We can eat here today."

"Okay, let's go then."

A year ago, I would never have imagined that I would be eating with someone at school.

Back then, it was normal for me to be alone. It was normal for people to stay away from me, it felt natural to be alone. There was no pain or regret there. I just accepted everything as it was.

Thinking back, I could see how boring, how lame, and how unhappy it all was.

I made fun of friendships, I looked down on love. I was a hopeless fool back then.

Being with someone, becoming one with the person you love. Now I knew what happiness that brought. Now that I knew, I would never go back to where I was.

No, I'm sure that my past self had actually longed for it. That rose-tinted Academy life.

"What do you want to do after school? Should we just look for a random quest?"

"No, I think...let's just go back home."

What we will do when we get back. I didn't even need to say.

"I guess I won't be able to sleep tonight."

It wasn't so much rose-tinted, but peach-tinted. This life.

Lust was a strong desire, almost as strong as hunger. I had discovered this just recently. It is quite frightening, even knowing this, you cannot stop it...

Before sunrise, when I had just started to fall asleep, my conscious woke me up once again.

"Are you crying, Kurono?"

The bed was now completely cool, with no remnant of the intense heat from earlier. He was facing the wall as if to hide and I could see that there was a slight trembling in his shoulder.

"...Lilly, she is calling me."

"It's a bad dream. All of it, it is finished."

The fight at Alsace, that last day. The sixth day of the month of the First Flame. Lilly had died that day.

The two apostles who had stood by, they had killed Lilly as if on a whim. There was a huge discrepancy in power. There was nothing I or Kurono could do.

No, it was because Lilly was sacrificed that Kurono was saved.

I had unleashed 'Aur Soleil' and was depleted of magic and had fainted. So I did not see everything. Kurono refuses to talk about the details.

However, it was obvious that whatever happened was exceedingly cruel.

"You can forget about it if it hurts. If it's hard, you can run from it. No one will blame you if you pretend that none of it happened."

"But...I..."

I kicked the blanket away and covered Kurono with my body. His tear-stained face now showed an expression of surprise.

Affection, compassion. The positive feelings I had in wanting to comfort him would change into shallow desire when I looked at his face. He was in unbearable pain, I knew that I was the only one to ever see him like this. I was filled with a desire to possess and a superiority that came with it. Almighty, all-powerful, I felt like I had gained everything there was in the world.

Before I knew it, I was devouring his mouth. At that moment, all reason had left me. I finally pulled away in order to breath.

"I will make you forget all of it... Just like I did before."

He had lost his friends, his trust, and his beloved Lilly. Kurono had been thrown into a pit of despair, he was turning into a husk of a human.

I devoted myself to taking care of him.

Neither of us knew anyone in Spada. In this room that we rented, this closed world, we were alone as a man and a woman.

"Don't leave me alone... Fiona." So saying, Kurono had pushed me onto the bed.

He was not well, I was his only surviving companion, his friend...I was a woman. It was natural for him to want me eventually.

"I'm sorry, that time, I..."

"Don't apologize about it."

I was waiting for you to do that to me. It was I who was a coward.

"I love you, Kurono. Your strengths and your weaknesses, all of you. And, you

have to understand that it is okay to run from a past that is nothing but pain.”

Forget it. All of it. Forget it. The sinister memories of despair, the memories of the beautiful Lilly, all of it. The past and the future, the only one who needs to be in your heart is me.

“You don’t have anyone to fight anymore. You don’t need to try. You don’t need to become stronger. You can live in peace. It’s okay.”

The only fortunate thing in all this was that the Crusaders had destroyed themselves.

Spada’s attack and Daidolos’ revolt had worked to expel the Crusaders from the continent of Pandora. Commander Sariel, 8th Apostle Ai and 11th Apostle Misa were killed. There was no one to kill for revenge.

“That is probably true.”

“Yes, it is.”

Finally, Kurono gently returned my embrace. My feelings were conveyed, they entered him. It was such a happy embrace.

“Thank you...I love you, Fiona.”

“I love you too, Kurono.”

This time, my body and my mind were both fulfilled. I was finally able to fall asleep.

Ah, what should I eat tomorrow? How should I make love to Kurono? My days of happiness had only just begun.

Chapter 389: Blissful Days

“... I’m back.”

I’d walked back home still in a dreamlike daze. Today, really did feel like a dream.

I’d made my first girlfriend, held hands for the first time with said girlfriend, and had my first experience walking home with my first girlfriend. With so many firsts, even the way from school to home that I’ve trekked for over a year now, just felt new. It’s like they say, my whole world had changed.

I’d been trying my very best, really giving it my all, to stay calm and cool, but in doing that, I didn’t remember a thing about our conversation on the way.

I was nervous, yes, but I was also on cloud nine in sheer joy. The girl called Shirasaki Yuriko, this unbelievably beautiful girl was in a relationship with me.

Holy, mother of... Every time I think of that fact, I’m in serious danger of breaking out in a wide grin——

“Mao, You’re back.”

For a moment, I was confused as to who that was. But I then realized that it was my own name in the next. I got a strange feeling as if, no one’s called me that in a very long time.

But let’s not sweat the small stuff. I focused my attention to the person in front of me, standing at the entrance as if she’d been awaiting my arrival.

“Oh, Sis... What’s with the uh, luggage?”

The girl who welcomed me home was Kurono Mana, my elder sister who, despite being a college aged woman, still sported a cute face that suited a little girl with twin-tailed hair. She’s family, but I had no choice but to objectively acknowledge her beauty. Actually, she even rivaled Shirasaki-san in that respect—— Wait no, since the latter has the extra correction of being my girlfriend, Shirasaki-san is clearly superior.

Now then, as for what my little Mana onee-chan was doing, she appeared to

be dragging a large luggage case behind her, like the stuff you'd use when going on a trip overseas.

"Yeah, so I'm leaving the house for a while."

She said, curtly with her doll-like expressionless face. No, she wasn't particularly mad or in a bad mood. She always looked like that.

"Eh, what, are you running away?"

"You're half right."

"Wait, no way!?"

I was trying to make a joke, but that backfired. My by-the-book sister was certainly not the type to do this sort of thing. Wait, what if she's hit one of those belated rebellious phases I read about?

"I'll be living with my boyfriend as of today."

She must consider the thing tremendously joyous, or exceedingly dirty, looking at it another way. When she spoke the last line, her eternal pokerface crumbled and she smiled faintly in a deep blush.

Holy shit, was I also making this sort of face a minute ago...? It's honestly embarrassing how similar we are.

"Wait, there's no way Mom and Dad are gonna allow that."

So that's why she was running away. But then it'd mean she really was running away from home, which doesn't add up with her telling me I was half correct.

"About that. Both of them are gone you know?"

"... Huh?"

"Dad got posted overseas for a while, and Mom went with."

"Huuuh!?"

W-what in tarnation is up with this dating sim protagonist scenario. Literally no way. This is way too out of the blue. There was no foreshadowing or anything about them going away.

“They left a letter on the coffee table, ‘Take care,’ it says.”

“Just that!? Seriously, hold up, just think about it, this is way too strange!”

“But they’ve left already.”

Meaning, no matter how I try to deny it as unrealistic, this was reality. My sister had no reason to lie. If she really wanted to run away, my sister was intelligent enough to devise a better lie and concoct a much more well thought out plan.

“Wait, so you mean, I’ll be living here alone?”

“Relax, I’ll come by on occasion.”

No, I’m saying I can’t relax. You’re telling me I’m suddenly gonna have to live alone.

“Mao, I know you’re punctual and your cooking isn’t bad either. Don’t worry so much.”

“Well, I mean I *can* handle it...”

But suddenly dropping it on me is still,

“Anyway, give me a call if there’s any trouble. I left a note with the address to my boyfriend’s apartment with Mom and Dad’s letter.”

She finished, signifying that she had nothing more to impart on her dear younger brother, and rolling along her large, black luggage case, my sister left the house.

“—— And that’s how I’m currently living alone.”

“The actual fuck!? That’s legit straight out of an erogé man, holy shit!?”

The one who yelled in pretty much the same reaction as me was, my classmate and friend, Saika Youta.

It was lunch time after 4 grueling periods of class. It was at that point that I confided in him my terrible situation of, only yesterday, being forcefully left to fend for myself.

I didn’t mind the appalled reaction, but keep it down a little.

“Alright, calm down. And please sit back down too, come on, hey.”

Saika had a knack for these over the top reactions.

Oh yeah, this reminds me how he was similarly heated up yesterday about the club manager girl for the soccer team... It somehow feels really nostalgic.

As a matter of fact, I somehow feel like I haven't seen him, this dude who looked normal enough but was a full-blown otaku inside, in a long while too.

I had a weird feeling about all this, but it wasn't bad enough that I wanted to expressly figure out why. Saika took his seat, and I continued the conversation,

“Still, it's surprising how stuff like this can happen in real life too.”

“Tell me about it, I still can't believe it.”

But once I spent the whole night alone yesterday, I had no choice but to admit that this really was happening.

Incidentally, just like Sis claimed before she left, the letter they'd left on the table only had those two words. Literally just, 'Take care,' as if they hadn't a single worry about their son.

Whatever, we're pretty much a laissez-faire household anyway.

“Geez dude, I can only get so jealous. If you got yourself a girlfriend on top of that, forget being jelly, I'd curse you to hell and back!”

Good thing you're a loner eh, Kurono, hahaha, Saika laughed. I froze up.

“Eh, what's with that reaction? We're supposed to laugh together as fellow losers right?”

“No, well, I mean... sorry?”

I wasn't planning on hiding it from him but, he's making it really hard for me. But I can't really deny it, since the lie was likely to turn awkward fast.

I could just feel another one of Saika's signature overreactions coming on. And I wouldn't blame him for this one.

Living alone + Has girlfriend. What kind of 17 year old high school boy would I be if I didn't expect some spicy happenings?

“HUH!? Kurono, y-y-you’re... no way!”

He quickly realized the truth from my obviously telling reaction. You know what, fuck it.

“Actually, I uh, made a girlfriend. Yesterday.”

“No way, no friggin’ way!? Who!?”

“... Shirasaki-san.”

“Die, just die, yankee face!!”

He hit where it hurts, and also literally hit my face in his seething. This might sound like I’m making him out to be a bad guy, but seeing my friend actually crying tears of bitterness made me want to think it was fine taking a few slaps to the face.

“What the hell man, what the hell happened! *How* did this happen!?”

“Yeah, Shirasaki-san, she went and confessed, right— —”

“DIE! Go to hell, you double-crossing bastard!!”

“C-come on, calm down,”

Fuck you, fuck youuu, he wailed in real tears. I tried to settle him down while parrying away his baby punches, but I guess nothing I say would get through to him now.

“It’s over, Kurono, it looks like our friendship ends here...”

“Are you actually serious? Come on, don’t be like that.”

“No, it’s fine, Kurono, let’s end this nicely. Once the MC chooses the heroine, the best friend character can take a hike.”

“You *have* to make everything into eroge, don’t you?”

He’s got a point, I’ve heard some guys stop giving any fucks about their friends once they get a girlfriend. Though, I’d appreciate it if he didn’t see me as so shallow.

“Let us stop this folly. *That* is now your reality, and I happen to have no place in it...”

With grim determination, the man called Saika took his bento in one hand and left his seat. All the while, he looked not at me, but at the door to our classroom.

“... Ah. Shirasaki-san.”

She was there, in all her flaxen haired glory. In her hands, a lunch box of her own.

“Go, Kurono. Don’t keep that cute gf waiting.”

Saika offered with a nihilistic smile, tears still crusting his cheeks. He wasn’t particularly good looking, but right now, he looked admirable.

“... Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it. Be happy with her.”

With that, Saika took his leave, like a lone gunman heading where the wind takes him.

I muttered, “Thanks man,” as I also made my way to Shirasaki-san.

Now then, if it turns out that she isn’t here to invite me to have lunch with her, I’d have no choice but to die of embarrassment...

“So um, how is it... Kurono-kun?”

Please worry not for me. She did it, Shirasaki-san, she really did come over with her handmade bento for me.

“Y-yeah, It’s great.”

I would’ve said the same thing even if this egg sandwich in my hand tasted a tad awful. But fortunately, or rather, as anticipated, every one of the items Shirasaki-san made were delicious. The omelet, the fried chicken, all of them felt like they were freshly made.

The egg sandwich I’m holding for example, it was exquisite to the point of me being bewildered how such a simple item could be made with such finesse. How in the world did she achieve this earth-shattering difference compared to all the egg sandwiches I’ve tasted in my life so far.

“I’m so glad you like it.”

She smiled, so honestly, so brightly, so beautifully, that I couldn't imagine that this was really happening.

I wasn't as deep in as Saika, but I'd always hoped to have something like this, to have a nice girlfriend, to have lunch together with her on a bench outside. But now that I finally had exactly that, I constantly felt that it was all a very convenient dream.

"Um, hey."

"What is it~?"

I do have some basis as to why I'm finding all this hard to believe.

"Why, me?"

"You're asking me why I came to like you?"

That's exactly it, that's what's making me so worried. Pathetic, I know.

"Yes, why. Actually, what part of me do you like anyway, I honestly can't tell."

"Huh, I wonder... I'm not sure myself, at some point, I realized that I love you."

Just when I was thinking she was going to claim love at first sight, she throws me an even weirder curve ball.

I was feeling a little dismayed at that, but without letting it show, I gave her a curt, "Right."

"Mm, but well, I'm really awkward and... I just couldn't bring myself to say it. I tried to be your friend without letting you know, but that, well, ended so... I'm sorry if I made you think I was avoiding you."

Seeing her thin eyebrows arched in such an apologetic expression, I felt dismay in a whole other meaning.

I was still uneasy about her vague way of falling for me, but I could clearly see that she's serious.

Maybe I was making light of her feelings in a deep corner of my heart. Maybe I was thinking that it'd be fine just going out with her for the heck of it.

"And then, yesterday, I finally worked up the courage. So I asked everyone

else from the club to give you and me a bit of time.”

“So you mean, other than me, everyone knew?”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to tell them, but they...”

Seems like all third parties could plainly tell how much Shirasaki-san was into me from her mannerisms. And me, being the dumbass I am, thought that she was being scared of me; all this time I’ve been in the literature club, more than a whole year.

“O-oh, I see...”

How damn spineless am I even. And here I always thought, ‘Don’t be dense, take the hints and go for it!’ In the end, everything was already done and over.

“But now, I’m finally together with you, I’m so glad I did it. I thought that I’d give up if you ended up rejecting me... but I honestly don’t think I could. I really liked you that much.”

She asserted and held my hand, my heart-rate now skyrocketing.

Every time she speaks words of love, every time we touch, all my doubts, all my worries, all my reservations start to disappear. She’s into me, she likes me. It won’t be long till I wholeheartedly start believing that.

“Thank you. You saying that really means a lot to me.”

I can’t keep being like this. Whether she really likes me or not, how much she likes me, why does she like me. I can’t keep wasting time on doubts to convince myself. I have to respond to this sweet girl’s feelings without deliberating anymore.

“Shirasaki-san, I still don’t know a lot about you, but I want to fix that. I want to learn all about you.”

“Me too, Kurono-kun, I want to know everything about you too.”

Replying with loving words, Shirasaki-san snuggled closer to me. Fingers entangled, arms and shoulders grazing. This salaciously sweet scent keeps enticing me.

I could reveal my deepest secrets to her and her alone.

“What, about you, Kurono-kun... anyone you liked?”

“None. But I’m thinking, maybe I was interested in you.”

I’d be a fool to not be, what with how gorgeous a girl like her was always near me. You could say I gave up on her, thinking she was out of my league. Or maybe, if I was a bit closer to her, I could’ve actually fallen for her.

“Fufu, you’re sweet.”

I mean, it wasn’t exactly a lie that I was basically into her because of her cuteness, but perhaps she didn’t mind that. She hugged my arm tight.

Crap, this goes on, and I’ll be under her spell in no time...

“So what about a first love, anyone like that?”

Should I play it cool, say that she’s my first? I frankly didn’t want to. I didn’t want to lie to her.

I actually did have a first love.

It’s actually somewhat embarrassing, enough that I’ve never told anyone about it. But, I guess I’ll be honest with her.

“Back in elementary, there was this girl I liked... actually, I think I admired her.”

That day, I was a mess.

As to why, it’s simple. I’d written my first piece of fiction, and my friend made fun of it.

I was so confident about it, proudly showing it to my friend, only to be showered with harsh criticism and insults. My pride was shattered and once the end of school bell rang, I made a dash for anywhere not there, tears spilling and all.

I didn’t feel like going home at all, and ended up running in the complete opposite direction. Really childish, now that I thought back on it.

I ended up at a park I’d never been to. I wasn’t looking to find it, I just happened to be there after I’d gotten tired of running away.

That’s when I met her.

“That girl looked really down as she sat on one of the swings. I wouldn’t have bothered with her if it was just that, but then I noticed that she was holding a bundle of manuscript paper.”

It was the same type I’d used when I wrote mine, so I recognized it right away. I thought, hey, maybe she’s like me too, and decided to call out to her.

Turns out I was right.

“I don’t remember what I said to her back there, but one way or another, I ended up reading her story.”

I sat on the swing beside her own, and read. It was good.

“— I was actually shocked. She looked to be the same age as me, maybe even younger. But despite that, her plot, her characters, her literary flare, it was all perfect.”

Dammit, it’s really good, I remember telling her, almost sobbing.

That’s when I finally understood. I understood that my friend was right in bashing my work.

I accepted it, no, I was made to accept it, and then, I threw my manuscript to the ground. I still remember it. The pages painting the park ground white.

“I realized that she was better than me, like heaven and earth. I was frustrated, I was jealous... and then I ran back home, crying.”

But I must admit, as a brat, I still had enough grit to not drop my pen forever.

I wanted to write as good as her. Kid me was working relentlessly, trial after error, rewrite upon rewrite.

And fast-forward a few years, I’d finally finished. My Adventures of Abel the Hero. The gist of the story was the same as the one I’d thrown away that day. It was a remake actually.

“I actually got my friend to say it was a good read... Though, he did add, ‘for a teenager.’”

“I thought it was really good too.”

So she read that. That’s kind of embarrassing actually. Well, all the lit. club

members did keep their work in the club room so anyone was free to read them. Well if she liked me from back then, it wasn't that much of a leap to assume she'd attempt to read my shoddy light novel-esque fiction.

"Kurono-kun, you were always so serious in lit. club weren't you. I really like that part about you."

"Th-thanks..."

Her eyes were so genuine, so innocent as she praised me that, rather than feeling happy, I was more embarrassed. Although, it raised my heart rate no less.

"Hmm... But I kind of feel *just* a little jealous, of that girl I mean."

"Really now? I know I said first love, but it was really more like I set her as my objective, right. And besides, I don't even remember what she looked like."

"But all that time you spent writing, you were thinking of just her weren't you? Even now, I bet."

D-damn you're sharp. Is this what they call the intuition of a girl in love?

That girl was like my origin story for how I came to write like I do, and I'm reminded of her every time I write.

But then again, I haven't been writing anything at all recently... No, wait wait, wasn't I writing just yesterday? So why is it that my fingers can't remember the feeling of tapping away on my laptop at all?

"Fufu, just wanted to tease you a bit, sorry. I don't really mind it."

And once again I admitted utter defeat against Shirasaki-san's radiant smile that seemed to say, *and that's how awesome a girlfriend I am.*

I was almost about to lose myself and just keep staring at her, but I got a hold of myself. I warded up her smile's seduction and vied to change topic.

"O-oh yeah, thanks for the lunch. It was really good, I mean it."

I'd somehow ended up finishing all of the bento Shirasaki-san had made for me. Since she was holding, or rather, clinging to my left arm, I couldn't really use it to eat, so I would've been in a real bind if the sandwich wasn't the main

item in the box.

Anyway, I had no problem finishing everything, so all's well.

"So um, we can do this again tomorrow, right? You wouldn't mind?"

"No, well actually... I'd feel sorry for making you."

"Hey, I'm your girlfriend aren't I? It'd be my pleasure."

Damn, and here I thought my Sis was the only one who'd get so into it. Makes me wonder if there's been a Yamato Nadeshiko boom going on or something. No, getting ahead of myself there. Shirasaki-san is just that good of a girl. Her girl power was off the charts.

"Thanks, I'll take you up on that offer then. Actually, my parents are going to be gone for a while, so I was worrying what I should do for lunch."

"Ah, so that's why you didn't bring your own today."

She really saved me today. Yesterday, when it turned out that my parents had up and left all of a sudden, I was so astounded at the fact, that I forgot to consider anything about lunch.

"It was all so sudden you know? And on top of that, my sister took the opportunity to crash into her boyfriend's place, can you believe that?"

"Uh huh... Then that means that you're living alone now?"

"Yeah, for a while, I guess."

I almost started to spill out all my complaints to her, but breathing in once, I decided against it.

"OK, then you uh, wouldn't mind if I came over sometime...?"

I wasn't so pure hearted as to accept that last line at face value. I'm a high school kid, one who's finally gotten himself a girlfriend. I'd be simply mad if I wasn't expecting you-know-what from those words.

Words that clearly expressed that a girl was ready and willing to come over to a guy's house where he lived alone.

"Eh, that's, well..."

And there goes me, the loser who can only react to this kind of situation with a flustered mess of a reply.

“I... can’t?”

“Of course you can! I mean, well... are you sure?”

Dumbass, she’s the one asking if it’s okay or not. Me asking her back just served to make it crystal clear that I held certain expectations about her requested visit.

“... Mm.”

And despite realizing this, she, Shirasaki-san, assented. Despite her face completely blushed in scarlet, she nodded in reply.

“O-OK...”

I could speak not any more. Also, I couldn’t look at her directly either. I cranked my gaze away.

But Shirasaki-san was still holding my arm tight, that softness, that warmth, I couldn’t stop feeling that, not at all.

Endlessly tempted by her genuine charm, my head had stopped working right. What was, how even, what do I—— My thoughts were a mess.

But my bad status was quickly cleared away. The familiar bell rang in my ears.

“Ah, there’s the bell.”

“Oh, you’re right, let’s head back!”

I was then released from Shirasaki-san’s tender clutches. For now.

The promise was already made. She’d come to my home.

Looks like it won’t be long before I completely become captivated by her...

Chapter 390: Oddity

Monday, the 14th of May. That was the fateful day when I fell unconscious in the literature club room, woke up in the infirmary, and ended up being confessed to by Shirasaki-san. And on Tuesday, that is, the very next day, I shared in her lovely handmade bento and made a promise to invite her home, my home, where I now lived alone.

“— So, how does Friday sound? I’ll make dinner at your place, so that’ll be fun.”

And thus the promised date was decided upon. Friday, the 18th of May.

“I’ll tell my folks I’m staying over at a friends house, so don’t worry about that.”

Additionally, it was decided she would stay over.

“Also, Saturday, let’s go on a date!”

It felt a bit odd that she was already staying over before we had our first date.

“O-O-OK... looking forward to it.”

And despite all the implications, I had not the pureness of heart that would compel me to deny her requests.

That week was, tough. You couldn’t blame me for being out of whack in anticipation for what would clearly become one of the best days in my life. I didn’t know what to do with myself. The classroom lectures went over my head I, I couldn’t even remember what I had for dinner last night.

And yet, the time I spent with Shirasaki-san at lunch and after school, those moments were permanently seared into my mind. About what she’d make for dinner, what places we’d go for the date, all that sugary sweet-talk between boyfriend and girlfriend.

I was falling for her more and more every day, I knew that. I could think of her, only her.

“*Haah...* get a grip, man...”

I realized I was dazed in love, but the throbbing in my heart just wouldn't settle down.

Especially today. Today was the day. The promised day. Friday the 18th. And currently, it was already 7th period. The weekend would start after this last class.

Any other Friday, I'd be bored to sleep in classic literature, but today was very different. I desperately leashed down my nerves so I could write down the notes from the blackboard.

And once the dreary lecture about uncommon conjugations started, I took that as my cue to look out the window.

My seat *was* in fact beside the window so I got a good view of the field outside where a multi-section gym class was being held.

Today was an uncharacteristically sunny day of Fall, and the guys outside were shedding sweat in an intense game of soccer. I was kind of jealous, I'd be a lot less worked up if I was out there running around instead of staying put in this boring class.

I enjoyed soccer. I wasn't exactly good at the sport, but I had the fortune of being tall and well built, so I wasn't too shabby either. Though, I kind of felt like the ref always fouled me way too much.

I was drifting into thought while calmly watching the soccer team boys absolutely crush the nerds. But then,

"... Wait, who's,"

All of a sudden, at a corner of the soccer field, a little girl appeared. No, it clearly wasn't someone returning the ball after someone kicked it far off field. No really, you could tell she wasn't a student here at a glance.

"That's... a maid?"

Because that little girl over there, was dressed in a maid uniform. Her long black hair was topped with a maid's headpiece, a pure white apron that symbolizes cleanliness was wrapped around her deep blue dress that extended to a long skirt. No doubt about it, it was a maid uniform.

And this girl who was dressed in such maid attire looked to be no older than a grade schooler. Also, walking beside her was a small black puppy.

Maybe she'd wandered in here while taking that pet for a walk. But then, even children would realize it was a high school seeing all the classrooms and students. She was a pretty bold kid to be able to walk in here anyway. I wondered what her parents were teaching her. No, it couldn't be anything good since they were making her cosplay like that.

This kind of felt really surreal. I mean, it'd be strange enough seeing a maid walking around town, but in a school setting, it was like, she was an oddity.

And obviously I wasn't the only one to notice such a bizarre presence. Everyone playing soccer was staring inquisitively at the mysterious little girl maid and pet puppy.

And then, the one who approached her first was the gym teacher, the man who'd been overseeing the match. An outsider had wandered into the school grounds, so it was obviously a teacher's duty to see to it.

"Hey there little miss, you can't come here, this here's a high school you know?"

I was just guessing what he said. The mean-looking gym teacher had quickly run over to the little maid girl.

Normally, a kid like her would either start crying or try to run away by now, but this girl was calm. She pulled on the puppy's chain-like leash and walked towards the teacher herself.

And then, there was a scream.

"Huh!?"

The little puppy that the maid girl was leashing along suddenly brought its fangs to bear at the gym teacher. Then, faster than the eye could see, the animal leapt onto the man, biting down on his face. The teacher made a throaty scream as he got knocked down.

The rabid pet's master, that is, the maid girl had let go of the leash before the attack and looked to have no intention of stopping the creature's carnage.

“Oi, what the fuck is that?”

“Holy crap, that dog’s going crazy.”

The other kids in class had of course heard the loud scream and had started gathering to the window. I was no different, I too was already standing with my eyes glued to the scene happening outside.

The boys and girls who were there, as it was still gym class, seemed to also keep watching dumbfounded. If this puppy had attacked one of the girls, I’m sure some of the more gutsy boys would at least attempt a rescue, but the one under assault just so happened to be the tall and buff gym teacher.

The worst someone like him would get was a few scratches. A small pup like that shouldn’t hurt him at all—— was what everyone believed.

Right up until that same little pup bit off the teacher’s windpipe.

“Kyaaa!?”

“What the hell, he’s bleeding a fountain over there!?”

Even from this distance, I could see the blood splattering out and all over from the man’s neck. It was at this point that all the onlookers went into an uproar.

But the insane violence was far from over.

The teacher looked to be in excruciating pain as he desperately tried to hold down the bleeding wound on his neck. But the dog showed no mercy.

No, it wasn’t simply attacking, this dog was eating. I could clearly see the little dog bite into the teacher’s face, tear apart his flesh and gulp down the freshly procured meat.

“... What in the world,”

It was shocking enough to see a dog eating human flesh, but the absurdity didn’t end there. With every bite, the dog seemed to be consuming the man ever faster.

The first bite was not that deep, the second bit off a whole chunk, the third, the fourth—— and before I noticed, the dog had devoured the man’s head

whole, bones and all.

This was unreal. That had to be some kind of monster disguised as a puppy. Or maybe some kind of man-eating alien or beast from hell.

Just now, a teacher of our school was reduced to nothing but a headless corpse. And as for the pup, it almost seemed to have gotten bigger in size.

No, I wasn't just imagining things.

The bigger dog kept on eating the corpse, bones, clothes and everything in between. And once it was done, the pup had now become a very big dog. It looked like a Siberian Husky, no, that there was a true wolf.

"This is just, crazy..."

I muttered vacantly, not speaking to anyone in particular. I mean, really, that beast, it'd killed and eaten a grown man while it was still a pup. And now it was much bigger. I didn't even want to imagine what this now doberman sized monstrosity could do.

It was a massacre.

The jet black wolf attacked the students one after another. The monster didn't distinguish on sex, and so, it's first victim ended up being a short girl who'd twisted her ankle and couldn't run.

The wolf leapt and swooped down over the girl, knocking her to the ground. A piercing scream, was cut off. One bite was all it took to chomp off half of her head. The other half was swallowed up with the next bite, causing the wolf to further increase in size.

After gobbling up the rest of the dead girl in her blue tracksuit, the wolf began to seek out new prey.

The other students had scattered like mice, crying, screaming all the way. But mere human legs couldn't possibly grant them escape. Humans normally can't even outrun dogs, and those students had no hope whatsoever against the monster in disguise currently hunting them down.

The wolf that had finished devouring the girl had now grown large enough to bite off a human head whole.

There went another head. The muscle and bone of the neck that was supposed to hold it in place was gnawed off as if it were a thread of plastic rope split by scissors.

Once it was done with its third victim the wolf pounced into 3 more kids as they ran. Its claws, thick and sharp like cleaver knives, all 3 students collapsed onto the blood that had gushed out from their backs.

The monstrous canine kept growing as it ate. It'd already become taller than its prey before my eyes.

The beast's maw could now swallow people whole, while its ferocious claws could scoop out earth as it saw fit.

It was almost like a giant monster now, a kaijuu.

"What the hell, is happening... I, must be having a nightmare..."

Eaten, devoured, slaughtered, killed—— I muttered in sheer disbelief at the atrocious hellscape laid out before me. I really didn't feel like all this was real.

But no matter how hard I shut my eyes from reality, I wasn't waking up.

Many of my classmates were howling in fear and anger, some girls had started crying from shock. I could still hear them.

I reopened my eyes. It was all still there. The soccer field drowned in blood. The remaining students still running furiously despite more than half their number having been culled.

I could say it was after around one and a half classroom's worth of students. That's when the kaijuu of a wolf had finally hit a plateau in its growth. The monster had feasted on people and had grown to a soaring 10 meters. I didn't know if it couldn't grow any more or just didn't need to. Which ever it was, it brought no good news.

And it kept on doing what it did. The giant wolf was systematically hunting down the remaining students while all they could do was run away anywhere and everywhere. It was then that I recalled the other Oddity.

The one who set loose this hellish monster, the little maid girl.

"... What's she up to?"

As if she was completely oblivious to the slaughterfest being carried out by her pet, the girl was quietly walking along the bloodstained ground. She was looking around restlessly, as if searching for something.

In different circumstances, I'd find that sort of mannerism adorable, but the scene behind her was one of insane carnage, a monstrous wolf was gobbling up a steadily decreasing supply of tracksuit wearing high school kids. The little girl felt just as terrifying.

There was no way she was just a normal girl. Hell, I doubted if she was even human. She could be a monster just as bad as that wolf, if not worse—— I was now focusing my attention on her, which, seemingly, wasn't a good idea at all.

And then, our eyes met—— I think.

“—!?”

No, not 'think', she really did see me. The girl started running straight towards the building my class was in. Even the way she ran was cute and feminine, with a spring in her step.

Her eyes were fixed to me, looking beyond the 2nd floor window and right on my face. She was now close enough for me to get a detailed look at her.

The little maid girl's long black hair, that was down to her waist, fluttered around as she ran closer, her face beaming with a smile as if she'd finally reunited with a long lost love. The right half of her face was hidden under long bangs but from the round yet sharp eye that peeked from her left, I could tell that she was making a lovely expression.

Then, her gaze never leaving me, the girl pointedly pointed at me, shouting,

“Goshujin-sama, there you are~!”

Chapter 391: Dream or Reality

“Goshujin-sama, there you are~!”

Shouted the little maid girl who then raised both her arms overhead. I expected her to make a jump to my location, but reality couldn’t be more different.

“Anchor hand!”

She yelled with the pronunciation slightly off, at which point, black wires shot out of her hands. It didn’t look like she had a grappling hook hidden on her. The wires really appeared as if by magic, or ESP or, or maybe she was actually a cyborg?

“And~ up!”

Before I could settle on any of those impossible explanations, the maid girl had come up to eye-level. The wires extending from her hands had instantly accelerated her to the second floor window.

Our eyes met with the glass window in between. Her sparkling dark eyes looked pure yet had a fiery passion, which set alarm bells ringing in my head.

I followed my instincts and kicked the floor, making a fast jump backwards.

“Hayaa!”

And clearly that was the right course of action as, in the next moment, one of the maid’s black, enamel-polished shoes hit the windowpane with incredible force.

One kick from her thin legs had completely shattered the window I was sticking fixedly to just moments ago.

“Wouaaah!?”

“Kyaaaaah!!”

The shards of glass assaulted the other students who’d been bunched up close to the window. They all, of course, tried to dodge back, but just ended up tumbling on each other like falling dominoes.

As the high school boys and girls groaned in pain, all heaped up like spaghetti, the maid, who was the primary cause for their misery, landed elegantly onto the classroom floor.

“Be at ease, Goshujin-sama, for I, your Hitsugi, shall save you at once!”

The maid, no—— the girl called Hitsugi was in fact pointing at me as she spoke that line of nonsense.

“Y-yo, Kurono, you uh, know this girl?”

Saika Youto, my bosom friend, said this from within the giant student dumpling. Him being able to throw in a quip in this kind of situation was just the sort of thing I loved about the guy.

“Nah, bro.”

No way I’d forget a girl with an ominous name like Hitsugi, in other words, coffin, if I ever met her.

“Goshujin-samaa! I can’t believe you’d forget about your Hitsugi!”

But she seemed to be acquainted with me. Actually, I was apparently her master too.

“This is quite unfortunate. But that simply means I have to wake you up, by force if I must!”

Hooted Hitsugi, coming up with a decision at her own discretion, her long black hair standing on end.

No, not just standing, that hair was moving. As if her hair had come alive, it split and wiggled eerily like a collection of snakes.

“This is fucked up, we gotta run, Kurono!”

“You don’t have to tell me tw——!?”

But before I could take action, the medusa-head maid girl Hitsugi sprang straight at me. I was having doubts whether I could push her aside despite her physique being no different from that of a small girl. I couldn’t let those hair tentacles touch me no matter what. I had to avoid direct contact.

“Shit!!”

I grabbed the chair closest to me and launched it at her. This must be that fight-or-flight response since I was able to easily hurl the thing with one hand.

“Fugyaah!?”

Strike. The creepy tentacle maid landed on the floor with a thud.

But I couldn't relax just yet. I turned on my heel and headed straight for the door leading out of the classroom. Throwing the chair at her had only bought me enough time to get the door open.

The sliding door rattled loudly in my ears as I fell into the hallway.

“Mmggg! Stop running!!”

While her still young voice held a tone that was as if we were playing tag, I could only hear the call of a devil from hell. I couldn't afford to look back and check.

It was technically still class time so the hallway was empty, making it easy for me to run the fuck away.

Oh right, there was a giant wolf monster right outside, wasn't there? Could I even go out of the school? But then again, staying inside wasn't exactly safe either.

Which way—— I hesitated, after having reached the staircase located at the center of the long hallway in 3 seconds.

Going upstairs will only leave me with less room. It was better to head down then.

I made a snap decision and was about to descend when,

“——Kurono-kun!”

I'd heard that sweet voice call out my name so many times this past week. No way would I mistake her voice for anyone else's.

“Shirasaki-san, why are you——”

Shirasaki-san, with her long, flaxen hair, came out into the hallway from another 11th grade classroom. She held a broom with a wide brush, giving it a T shape. Wait, was that supposed to be her weapon?

“Foooooh!” Hitsugi roared, “Goshujin-sama, you will not get away!”

I’d stopped dumbstruck at the edge of the stairs and Hitsugi had taken that lapse to close in. The deadly medusa head was almost on me, and this time, I had no chair to throw.

“It’s alright, Kurono-kun. I’ll protect you.”

Shirasaki-san said as she swiftly snuck in to defend me. In the same movement, she fiercely thrust the broom in her left hand at Hitsugi.

“Gephh!?”

She used the non-brush end and struck Hitsugi hard on the pit of her stomach.

Her weapon, with its cheap wooden shaft and rounded, blue handle cap had practically no offensive ability, her apparent skill in wielding it made the cleaning utility into the perfect defensive weapon.

The small maid was easily blown away, and landed pitifully on the linoleum flooring.

“Kurono-kun, are you hurt?”

“Oh, uh, I’m alright.”

I felt a bit pathetic having to be saved by her, what with this large body I had at my disposal. No, I couldn’t possibly make moves like she displayed just now, Shirasaki-san was amazing.

“Did you have like, high level training in the naginata or something?”

“Uh, no? What makes you think that?”

I, couldn’t respond. I strongly felt that I shouldn’t ask any further.

“K-kuh... damned seductress! Get away from my Goshujin-samaaa!!”

Maid girl Hitsugi howled as she got on her feet. Her hair was reforming into wiggly tentacles, now even more agitated. Actually, it kind of looked like there were a lot more of them now.

It was like she’d taken no damage at all from that strike just now. Tough little girl.

“You get back, Kurono-kun. I’ll defeat that monster.”

Shirasaki-san moved further forward, saying a rather heroic one-liner. I felt hesitant to stop her too, after seeing her dish out that pole-arm punishment just now.

She looked like she could actually do it too, she could beat that tentacle maid with just a broom.

“No, wait, that’s crazy! We need to run—”

“Don’t worry, Kurono-kun, I won’t let them take you.”

Shirasaki-san spoke without turning back. She would hear none of my pleas, only showing me her back, poised for battle.

Was I supposed to just leave it all to her.

I... wasn’t I, supposed to, protect?

“I *will* save my Goshujin-sama! Take this, *bind arts!!*”

“I won’t hand over Kurono-kun.”

Hitsugi and Shirasaki-san both sprung into action, their respective weapons ready to strike.

Hitsugi made the first move. Once she yelled ‘bind arts’, which I assumed was an offensive technique, her hair, that had formed into tentacles, transformed even further. They’d become jet black chains. Seeing these dark, seemingly metallic chains made me instinctively feel as if they were made so as to allow no escape.

That was not all there was to these chains. The binding weapons were each tipped with razor sharp claws. Claws that could surely shred a woman’s delicate skin into ribbons.

The chain claws numbered a total of ten.

And with them all originating from Hitsugi’s hair, she looked to have complete control over their movements.

All of them headed for Shirasaki-san. Five of the chains went at her straight, forming a vertical line, 2 pairs went at her from the left and right, and the final

one arced up to the hallway ceiling before diving straight towards her head.

It looked humanly impossible for her to dodge something like this. The chain claws were moving so fast they looked like they'd cause whiplashes. She'd have to be superhuman to be able to dodge just one.

And yet, I just couldn't picture the scene of Shirasaki-san being hopelessly killed by that deadly attack.

I was sure it wouldn't happen. She can and will overcome this multi-directional assault—— just like a certain girl in white.

“—— huh!?”

And she did it.

With one powerful swing downwards, Shirasaki-san repelled all 5 death claws coming at her from ahead. However, that move also caused the cheaply made broom to break.

In the same movement—— in the exact same timing as her one handed broom attack, she shot out the weapons in her previously empty right hand, dealing with the 4 claws encroaching from her left and right.

I hadn't even seen her take those out. Shirasaki-san had, stuck between her fingers, 4 different writing utensils.

Starting from the space between her thumb and index finger, a sharpie, a black ball point pen, a red ball point pen, and a felt-tip pen. I only saw them after they hit the chains, so I could only conjecture that she'd thrown them.

Two on the left and two on the right. With one motion of her hand, she'd struck 2 pairs of attacks coming from two different vectors. What was amazing was the fact that all these pens hit dead on the mark and, though they couldn't parry away the bulky chains, they did succeed in redirecting their aim just enough to let Shirasaki-san squeeze out of the way.

Only the chain from above remained now.

And, as if to demonstrate that she could deal with merely a single chain with ease, she easily dodged it with a slight shuffle of her legs.

Her marine uniform had not one scratch as the chain claw missed its mark,

striking dumbly on the floor.

Shirasaki-san then started once again approaching Hitsugi, the maid girl finding herself wide-eyed at the feat she'd just been shown.

“You little! I am not done yet! *Pile——!*”

Hitsugi howled, gripping her right hand into a fist and getting ready to make a large swing. At the same time, all 10 of her chain claws were released from her hair, scattering all over the hallway. Some even slid up to my feet.

But I wasn't paying attention to these minor details. I couldn't take my eyes off of the mortal duel happening before my eyes.

I was on edge—— No, excited, perhaps even thrilled. Because I *knew* what Hitsugi was about to do next. I think, maybe. Before I noticed, I'd also gripped my own right hand into a tight fist.

“*Bunkeerrrr!!*”

A torrent of swirling black formed with Hitsugi's hair. The raging black hair enveloped the maid girl's small fist, forming into a piercing, penetrating drill.

This 'Pile Bunker' attack appeared to be a single, straight forward yet extreme punch.

The mana held within this punch far surpasses the amount in Bind Arts. A pinpoint concentration of Black mana that is released on impact. Simple, yet it's that simplicity that makes it the fastest to use. That, is the first Black Magic. That, is Pile Bunker—— Wait, what am I doing making stuff up...? No, this wasn't that. This wasn't one of my wild fantasies again, it was something, something deeper, something that resonated in me, something etched into my head, my body... something.

I, wasn't I forgetting something? Something very important?

Wasn't I supposed to use that to protect? With that Pile Bunker, with that power?

“—— Nh!!”

It was then that I realized that Shirasaki-san had been struck. That punch must've had incredible force to send her flying like that.

“Shirasaki-san!?”

She was coming towards me. I hurriedly attempted to cushion her small body—— but it seems that wasn’t necessary.

I could hardly believe it. Shirasaki-san rotated in mid-air and smoothly landed on the hallway floor. Her rubber sole shoes lacked in grip so she still slid backwards from the momentum but her posture remained firm all the while. This was clearly beyond the realm of what even the sportiest high school girl should be capable of.

With this show of acrobatics done, she’d now ended up in her original position in front of me again.

“It’s fine. I just got a small scratch.”

Said Shirasaki-san, smiling as she looked back towards me. She casually gave a wave of her right hand to show me that it was in fact not serious and had only turned a bit red. To think she could get away with just that after receiving the Pile Bunker... by countering with an inverse rotation of White mana—— once again, just like her.

“Kurono-kun, please don’t worry about anything. You don’t need to concern yourself with this. Leave it to me. Just leave everything to me.”

It was the same, lovely expression I’ve been falling in love with all throughout this past week. But now, now that smile invoked a sense of dread. Why?

Was she really the Shirasaki-san I knew? —— The moment I bore that doubt, there was a quaking roar.

Graaaaaaaaaaah!!!

Suddenly, the floor in front of me burst upwards, revealing a dark monster. Smoke and cement dust fogged the hallway and I could see this giant monster’s head looking right at me.

Its black skin had a radiance of polished metal. Its upwards pointing ears and even its teeth had this pitch black quality. It almost looked as if the beast had been born from a shadow, but black wasn’t the only color on its palette. On the inside of its open maw, I could see red, a deep red like intense flames. This fiery

crimson also appeared in its eyes that glowed dangerously.

“Wait, this is the wolf from outside!?”

This was that same wolf without a doubt. It was the same black color, and since it'd gotten a lot bigger after it started eating the students, the size matched too.

But holy crap was it huge. Even just its head reached all the way up to the ceiling. It could easily swallow my unusually tall, 190 cm body with a single bite.

Wait, but then, what's going on with the first floor where its body is supposed to be...? No, this wasn't the time to be thinking about that.

The wolf chomped on the air 2-3 times, giving off intimidation.

“What the hell!?”

And then, the giant red and black maw began coming towards us. The relentless force of destruction easily chomped through the floor as it advanced.

And it wasn't doing this slowly. By my estimate, it could very well turn us into mince meat by the time we ran 3 steps backwards.

And despair—— was not on the menu. I put one foot forward.

“Shirasaki-san, run!!”

It was because she was still in front of me. Which meant that she'd be eaten first. And I'd be eaten right after her, but... but still, the one thing I didn't want was seeing my lovely girlfriend cruelly devoured right in front of me.

“Uooooooooh!!!”

I roared to dispel any lingering fear and regret as I recklessly charged at the encroaching doom.

I will protect Shirasaki-san. I might not even last a second. This might all be just for my own satisfaction. But my body, no, my soul ordered me to act. To do everything I can to protect her.

My Power would be used to protect.

It was when those dark fangs and crimson mouth were only inches away that I finally remembered that simple truth.

“—— Kurono-kun!?”

The fact that I could hear her shocked scream was probably proof that I was still alive.

“Ugh... hurts, like hell...”

Me choosing to move by instinct had led me to the action of grabbing the beast's open maw with my bare hands. My right hand held its upper jaw while my left hand held the lower one, stopping its destructive advance.

Though this obviously meant that my hands were placed along lines of razor sharp teeth. Both my palms were pierced by the knife-like fangs and a stream of blood flowed down from them.

It hurt like crazy, but I could bear it. I didn't relax the strength in my arms even slightly. I'd overcome the monster's powerful biting force head on.

I was battling an unearthly creature by somehow also using unearthly strength. It was as if I was in a dream where I could perform awesome feats of strength—— But reality might burst in any moment now.

I'd stopped it for now, but I wasn't exactly confident that I could do it for long. No really, I'm not kidding here... maybe another 10 seconds, nope...

“What do you think you're doing, you stupid mutt!!”

That shrill and annoying yelling had to be from Hitsugi. I knew because I was so used to hearing it, wasn't I? The pressure on my hands lessened once I finished that thought.

Black chains came flying in. They wrapped themselves around the wolf's head as if to punish it for misbehaviour.

But the mad beast rebelled anyway. As if it didn't want to let its prey escape, it struggled fiercely against its chains.

Anyway, this should buy enough time for Shirasaki-san to escape. Thanks a bunch, Hitsugi.

“Shirasaki-san, you gotta run, now!”

“... Why?”

“What do you mean why!? We have no time, just run already!!”

But my desperate pleas only fell on deaf ears.

A sudden warmth on my back. She had embraced me, as if declaring that in no circumstances would she leave me.

“Kurono-kun why, why didn’t you run?”

“And leave you here!? I’d never do that!!”

“Sure you can, just leave me and run. Easy right? I can stop this monster here, so you just need to run away.”

“I’m saying I can’t!”

“Yes you can. Even if I die, I’m sure you can get an even prettier girlfriend. You need to live, only you need to live on. I just want you to be happy, and only be happy.”

What the hell was she saying? I was completely unable to understand how she could say something so inhuman— but a moment later, I started to. I began to understand what she wanted, I was made to understand.

A will flowed into me.

This will demanded I obey.

Be happy, be blissful. Happiness exists for you, and only you.

The world will bring you happiness. The whole world is for you.

Therefore, no matter how many are sacrificed, you must still remain happy.

So you’ve lost one woman? Let’s give you two. A cute fairy and a lovely witch. If that still doesn’t satisfy you, let’s include a beautiful princess. And her, and her, and even her. You can have anyone, how ever many you desire—

“No! I never wanted that!”

“Why not? You don’t need to suffer any more, Kurono-kun. Just forget about all the painful, hurtful things, alright?”

“I’m not doing this because I want to!”

“Then just don’t, it’s fine, so just stop. You don’t need to work hard, to

endure. You don't need to put in any effort at all. Everything will go exactly the way you want. And it will make you happy, Kurono-kun. It will feel wonderful, I guarantee. It will feel so, so good."

Exactly as I want. If I only wish it, I could mete all my base desires, of power, of beauty, of lust, anything.

The perfect life. Everyone dreamed of it, and I was no exception.

I was supposed to spend the night together with Shirasaki-san. I was really looking forward to it.

"Yes, that's right. You'll feel so good once you have sex with me. I promise I'll satisfy you. Now, and forevermore. I will satisfy your every desire——"

"... But, none of this is real."

Her slender arms around my waist felt awfully cold.

"Why..."

The warmth on my back was now completely gone. It felt like a block of ice was pressing into me.

"Why, why are you saying that! This isn't a dream, this isn't fake, it's all real, all of it, all of this is real, believe me!"

"Just, stop already. I, remember everything now."

Everything around me started becoming black. Far away, I could make out something that must've been the hallway. It was as if the darkness was swallowing all of creation. The world was dyed in an explosion of black.

But some things were still there. Namely, the wild wolf that was still trying to tear into my hands, Hitsugi who was trying her best to stop it, and on my back, Shirasaki-san—— or at least, the something that took her form.

I fully realized that it wasn't her, but I still had to say it.

"Thank you. It was a good dream——"

"Kurono-kun, nooooooooooooo!"

I knew a very easy way to wake up from this dream. I just needed to give the order.

“—— do it, EvilEater.”

I relinquished the strength in my arms.

The last thing I saw was the inside of the mouth that ate up anything and everything in this world. Bloody, fiery crimson like I was falling into the depths of hell. The whole scene could be described as incredibly scary.

But my heart was the picture of calm. I felt as if I'd just slept in a little extra on the weekend. I had my fill of happy dreams. I'd gotten more than enough.

It was now time to go back—— back to reality.

Chapter 392: The Fang that Devours

“— —Ghaa!?”

I suddenly woke up with a sharp pain coursing through my body.

A dark cave. Cold— yes, I remember, this was in the Asbel Mountain Range, inside the Lust Rose’s den.

“Shit that hurt... but thanks, Evil Eater, old pal.”

The ‘Craving Wolf Sword’, Evil Eater, was currently digging into my left shoulder.

It had leapt up from my shadow like a killer whale, breaking through the spatial barrier of Shadow Gate to attack me.

“Huh... so it evolved. It’s not the same Evil Eater at all.”

I could clearly see change all across the large blade.

The most prominent of which was that the blade was now split along the middle, like a pair of scissors— No, like a ravenous beast’s maw.

The split blade was carving into my shoulder in such a way that felt like a real Chaos Eater was biting down on me, using its power to drain my mana.

Maybe this is why Regin-san didn’t fix Evil Eater like he did my other equipment. He must’ve predicted that it’d evolve in some way. The ‘wound’ it had received from the Greed Goar, that is, the large hole in the middle of this blade had molded into a form much more suitable for devouring prey.

The first of which happened to be me. Or, it could’ve completed its evolution just now when it stabbed into me, getting its fill of my blood, meat and mana.

The inner sides of this new cursed blade were not smooth edges but rough and pointed like a saw blade. It looked perfect for digging into flesh and I could feel it even now sucking away my blood and mana.

It was now dyed jet black from the base to its tips and even had red, veiny lines running across its surface much like those of the current Neck Cutter. The veins pulsed harder the more it drained me.

Which was starting to feel like a little too much right about now. I didn't want to pass out again right when I just woke up.

Right, it's been a while since I used this, but now would be a good time to use Flesh Compensation, my only healing type magic.

Though I'd have to remove this thing from my shoulder before I started filling up the gouged out wound with the good old black mana jelly — —

“ — — And how long are you planning on biting Goshujin-sama, you stupid mutt! Get back here right this instant!”

But instead of me, Hitsugi took the initiative to discipline the seemingly out of control Evil Eater, by which I mean she was jolting my brain with her loud yell.

Multiple jet black chains, the type that formed when I used Bind Arts, shot out from Shadow Gate and wrapped themselves around the hungry blade.

Evil Eater rattled against its chain bondage as if it really was a raving animal. But it was now being prevented from biting down any further.

Hitsugi was now able to directly receive my mana, so the chains she used of her own volition were strengthened quite a bit more. She'd be able to tear Evil Eater off my shoulder by force if she needed to.

She wasn't able to do it in the dream, but here, in reality, she was stronger than the toothy sword. Right. Reality.

“Thanks Hitsugi. You did a good job getting Evil Eater to me in there.”

“Golly!! Goshujin-sama praised me just now, hurray!!”

Damn, I really owed her big time for this one. If Hitsugi hadn't come to my rescue, I'm pretty sure I would've stayed there.

I needed to thank her somehow, no, I guess maybe I should call it a reward. Anyway, I needed to do something special for her, or I couldn't keep my pride as her master.

“Yeah, you're definitely the best maid ever.”

Hitsugi shrieked in joy and delight inside my head as she pulled off Evil Eater and handed it over to me.

The cursed wolf sword now had its unmoving grip firmly held in my hand, now only able to chomp down on thin air.

Now holding it, I could feel a sense of familiarity with the weapon even though it had changed so drastically. It was still the Evil Eater I knew.

The sword's grip hadn't changed at all from the evolution. It was still the same one that Vulcan used for many years.

My senses told me that the blade portion, that'd been made from a Chaos Eater fang, had evolved into a much more intense curse, while the grip still carried Vulcan's malice.

These dark emotions flowed up my arm and into me — More, we need to devour more. Evil Eater is evolved and it hungers. I also hunger — the curse said.

"Yeah, you want more! I'll give you more! But you'll need a new name. From today, you're Evil Eater EX, the Ravenous Fang Blade!"

I turned the bestially growling blade towards the ground. It would first devour my restraints.

When I woke up, I'd noticed that I'd been encased in ice up to my knees. My feet were very cold, and I was starting to lose feeling in them.

Using Evil Eater EX on these shackles easily shattered them into a million pieces, making the tiny glass-like fragments sparkle in the surrounding air as the ice burst.

"I was dangerously close to joining all the other frozen statues here... and not just me, all three of us. This could've gone really bad..."

Now that I had escaped the the Lust Rose's dream, I had a good understanding of how this trap really worked.

We'd been anticipating that the Lust Rose would have to approach us in order to cast its powerful mind control, but that theory couldn't be more wrong.

This elusive monster had shown itself to us from the very start. It had done this slowly, gradually enough that we wouldn't notice, and it'd been pulling us into its hypnotic trance all the while.

It was those thorny vines, the ones running densely along the walls and ceiling. That was the true form of the Lust Rose. Or at least, part of it. These vines were like its arms and legs, tentacles of sorts that extended out from its main body.

The curious part of it was that this whole trap didn't involve directly using mana on us. At a glance and in reality, these vines were simple plants with nothing out of the ordinary.

And we'd ignore it, thinking it must be part of the plant life indigenous to the cave or something — which was all part of the Lust Rose's plan. In short, the whole thing was a Magic Circuit that induced us to sleep. Rather than magic, this would fall in the realm of hypnosis.

The adventurers who'd come here would have to use some light source. With their common torches, they'd only see part of the patterned vines and inevitably ignore those in favor of advancing ahead. And as they would walk, the patterns would slowly start getting to them, eventually dominating their minds.

This technique was completely visual in nature so there was no way to detect the traces of a spell being cast.

My senses and Lily's telepathy weren't able to make anything of it, because there wasn't anything we could make of.

This sort of visual hypnosis was a very weak sort of mind control but if not noticed, it was practically unavoidable.

And once one of its victims fell into their ideal dream world, they'd have no way of coming back — at least, that's what I could say from my own experience.

"Both of them are in ice too... *really* close call this time..."

Behind me, I spotted Lily and Fiona, both also encased in ice, all the way up to their waists. Both girls were sleeping peacefully. It made me wonder what sort of sweet dreams they'd been having.

With the expressions they had, I'd hesitate on waking them if they were resting on a bed, but they'd go to sleep forever if I didn't get them out of that

ice.

I shattered their ice prison with one swing of Evil Eater Ex like how I'd done mine.

The reason this ice broke so easily was because this was ice made of magic. In other words, my ravenous sword was draining the mana out in addition to the powerful impact it produced.

This whole cave was the Lust Rose's den, or maybe its 'stomach' would be a better analogy. In any case, its influence was spread throughout the whole place.

Once its prey was blissfully dreaming, the Lust Rose would use this ice magic to preserve them in its dwelling and slowly feed on their life force until nothing remained. In the end, we would've become skeletons in ice, with all our weapons and equipment still in place.

But this sort of enchanting death had been accepted by all its previous victims.

Which reminded me about something Jimmy-san mentioned. How the Cleric who'd once defeated a Lust Rose had said on his deathbed, that he only wished he could've been killed by the Lust Rose along with his party members.

"Makes a lot of sense now that I've experienced that world myself..."

The Lust Rose's dream, its ability to create an ideal but complete world was none other than the magic of Telepathy.

The vine circuit only had the effect of inducing sleep. Once an adventurer was asleep and defenseless, the Lust Rose would hack into their brain using its powerful Telepathy and plant its illusory world.

The first thing it would do was filter through the person's memories and goals. What they liked, what they hated, moments they enjoyed, moments they were hurt, their traumas, their desires—— everything.

Once it knew all of a person's memories, the monster would create their most ideal world in the most realistic way possible.

Having things be too convenient wouldn't be favorable after all. Its victims

could wake up if they felt something was off. Hypnosis was a delicate process like that.

To achieve this balance, the Lust Rose was very patient, it sifted through the mind, and had the intelligence to determine what was viable to show in that blissful dream.

And then, when the oblivious victim started wishing for their happiness to continue forever, that would be the moment they'd be completely trapped.

In my case, that moment would've been the night when Shirasaki-san was going to stay over at my place, and we would, uh... engage in certain activities. Maybe I would've been too far gone after that happened, even if Hitsugi and Evil Eater came to the rescue.

I was deeply ashamed. That was, after all, something born due to me being a stupid virgin. I should've realized it was a dream the moment she confessed to me. I mean seriously, it's so dumb it hurts!

"Wait, they're still, okay... right?"

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried. I'd caught them as they were falling after I broke their ice cage, but they were still asleep, they still had that same peaceful expression. They might even have trouble distinguishing dream from reality once they wake up... No, there's no point in worrying about that.

Right now I needed to focus on killing the Lust Rose, first and foremost.

"Your telepathy won't work on me any— more!"

With it's jagged maw closed, Evil Eater EX was even larger than it was pre-evolution. I struck the cave walls with this now greatsword sized weapon.

I hit a part of the wall that was curved, but where I aimed didn't matter in this case, so long as I struck the 'inner' side. What I mean is, this whole portion of the cave connected back to itself in a circle.

And the Lust Rose sat in an enclosed space at the center.

"There we go."

Both inner and outer sides of this circular tunnel might look solid, but this wasn't quite the case. The cave was originally a large circular area which had

been later made into the tunnel by the Lust Rose to hide itself. This inner side was in fact not hard to break into.

Hypnosis, dream weaving, telepathy, and even wall manufacture. This was quite the versatile monster we were dealing with. It deserved its 5th tier rank.

The inner wall quickly fell apart. And inside, I could see only darkness, even with my eyes now adjusted to the dark. The Lust Rose shouldn't require light to do its thing so obviously, it'd have no problem nesting in the pitch dark.

"It had its hypnosis, but I broke through that. And now, I even have its location. It's completely cornered..."

The reason why I suddenly knew so much about this monster was because just like it did to me, I also happened to scour through its mind.

When Hitsugi and Evil Eater were ravaging my ideal dreamscape, the Lust Rose tried to maintain control by pulling out all the stops. It decided to telepathically hack my mind much more forcefully.

Shirasaki-san was suddenly displaying superhuman feats of strength and technique. And that's when I realized that— yes, I knew them, these were abilities I'd seen demonstrated by the strongest individual I knew of.

Sariel, the 7th Apostle.

The fight between Hitsugi and that fake Shirasaki-san reflected the fight I once had with the Apostle herself on top of the walls surrounding the Daidalos capital.

She'd used her spear to repel my Sword Arts coming from the top, front and sides, she'd countered my close range pile bunker by reversing its flow, she'd even parried my surprise attack with the Basilisk bone. The series of events were almost identical to the one in the dream.

It had really peeked deep into my memories... and for that reason, I was able to peek back.

Telepathy was also like Hypnosis in that it was very delicate, easily brushed off with the help of some outside help. I'd forgotten that fact since Lily made it look so overpowered, when in reality, using such mental techniques carries a good

deal of risk.

The worst of which was the existence of a Backdoor.

It was a phenomenon where the assailee could in turn read through the memories and emotions of their mind delving assailant.

If the assailee could also use Telepathy, it was entirely possible to construct a Backdoor on their own. And even if they didn't if the assailant got confused enough via some sort of jamming, they would lose part of their control, and their own information would start leaking out.

In addition, if this was a particularly powerful Telepathy and you successfully scattered their control, it was even possible that the caster would start receiving information from all the minds in the surrounding area. This overflow of information into the caster had the risk of causing amnesia or even split personalities.

Incidentally, the one who taught me all this wasn't Lily, but Nell, back when she was giving me private lessons. Surprising how small things like that became useful in the long run. And Nell, she's been saving me in lots of ways now that I thought I about it. I'll be sure to get her more of that pudding she liked.

But I digress. So the way I was able to read the Lust Rose's thoughts was with the Backdoor method.

The Lust Rose might've had incredibly strong telepathic prowess, but Evil Eater could just eat it. Which it did.

Hitsugi hadn't chosen to come with Evil Eater on a whim. She did it knowing that without Evil Eater draining the mana that made up that world of dreams, it couldn't be broken. Any of my other weapons would have inflicted pain only, not dispel the hypnosis.

When I remembered who I was again, I had Evil Eater devour anything and everything, which was exactly when the Backdoor opened.

The Lust Rose was born with its absurdly strong Hypnosis and Telepathy, which it had used all this time without a single failure. So once I'd broken it for the first time, it had no idea how to react. It lacked the knowledge and experience to deal with this scenario.

For 30 years the monster had fed on its victims, always using the same, tried, true and tested method. Once I started receiving these memories, I started to know how the Lust Rose thought, what made it tick.

And then, until the time I was finally awoken by the sharp pain in my shoulder, I received the torrent of information that was the Lust Rose. I was confident that right now, I was more knowledgeable about this creature than anyone else.

I knew all of it, I knew fully how blissful it'd be to simply give in, simply stay in that dream. And while understanding everything, my resolve to defeat the Lust Rose didn't waver in the slightest.

Maybe I'll say the same words of regret as that Cleric when I die, that it would've been better if I'd been killed by that Lust Rose. Maybe the next time I meet Sarii and end up dying, yeah, I could see myself doing that.

"Still... I want power."

And you'll be the one giving it to me, Lust Rose.

The power to defeat Apostles, the 4th divine protection.

Chapter 393: The 4th Divine Protection

We'd usually leave the job of lighting up dark locations to Fiona since she was our fire specialist. But it wasn't like I was incapable of using simple magic like Torch on my own. I just had to use the pseudo fire magic granted by the 1st Divine Protection.

"Torch—— and, huh. Not as effective as I'd hoped."

A balloon sized ball of black fire popped into existence on top of my palm. It was swaying slightly but stayed afloat.

It's color was completely black but strangely, though faint, it was able to illuminate the inner sanctum I'd broken into without issue.

I cast a total of five of these torch balloons and issued them all over the room. Now that I could see inside, I shouldered Evil Eater EX and stepped inside.

Now on the other side of the wall I just destroyed, I scanned the area where the Lust Rose nested. It had an area as wide as the arena in Spada's Grand Colosseum.

But the ceiling was still low like in the circular cave outside of here, so there wasn't the same sense of massiveness as that boisterous arena.

It actually wasn't like the arena at all, but a lot more like—— like you see in those Sci-fi movies, the mother computer, the core room, riddled with circuitry and wires.

"It's true to its namesake at least..."

At the center stood a giant flower, a rose. It looked fragile, ephemeral with it's almost transparent blue petals. Like a delicately crafted ice sculpture the blue rose gave the impression that a miracle just might happen. But this flower was abnormally large, standing at 3 meters, it's size only reinforced the idea that it was a powerful monster.

And since it was flower based, the Lust Rose could be the plant variant of a Succubus, the Alraune, a monster with the upper body of a woman that popped out of a flowery base body. This rank 3 monster was listed in the Guild's

almanacs, though, I haven't had the chance to fight a real one.

An interesting point of note would be that although they always displayed a woman's body, those women weren't necessarily all beautiful.

The oversized rose I was looking at didn't seem to have such a feature. Though, since it primarily used all manner of mental afflictions on its victims, I suppose it didn't need one.

The particularity of this flower monster was the plethora of thorny vines that extended out of its base.

Its stalk was thick and short, the flower itself appeared as if it was blooming straight out of the floor, and all around it, from all 360 degrees of it, vines surged out like waves.

That's what made my head think of a high-tech supercomputer.

It wasn't moving these vines despite me approaching closer with each step which assured me that it wasn't like a Morjura which could manipulate its tentacles at will.

I crushed the vines underfoot as I closed my distance to the Lust Rose, but it showed no sign of doing anything.

Did it really not have anything else to resist with?

No, I shouldn't let my guard down. The Backdoor gave me more than enough information on its staple ensnaring techniques but it didn't give me everything.

There was still the chance that a woman could suddenly leap out from within those petals and attack me. There was the precedent of the Sloth Gill doing that from the Greed Goar's lopped off head.

But I now had countermeasures for that. With the 3rd Protection, Over Accel, I'd be able to deal with surprise events like that.

So, as I still kept my guard up, I'd arrived at a distance where I could strike it down with Evil Eater EX— And that's when it moved.

The frozen rose petals began to soundlessly unfurl.

An attack... no, not quite. What appeared from within the flower was, as I'd

speculated, the special trait of an Alraune, a female body.

“... Kurono-kun.”

She called to me. In the same sweet, lovely voice it used in that dream, it called to me.

“Shit... really getting on my nerves now...”

It was Shirasaki-san. Not in a dream, but in reality, right in front of me, there stood the figure of the same Shirasaki Yuriko as in my memories.

She was naked, which could be because the Lust Rose couldn't recreate the uniform I always saw her in or because it deemed that her bare figure would be more potent in seducing me.

Her clear, white skin, long, black, glossy hair, moderately full breasts and a slim waist. Everything below was hidden behind blue rose petals.

To me her body looked, less bewitching and more like a work of art. It was simply and only, beautiful.

Her clear black eyes looked straight at me as she continued speaking,

“Please Kurono-kun... don't do this.”

She was begging to be spared.

Useless, how stupid, I didn't have to listen to this, I clearly knew this was a monster—— but the fact that I had yet to cut her down showed that her words carried effect.

I really was hesitating.

“Please, I'm begging you... I just want to live here quietly, in peace.”

Which was a good point. The Lust Rose, unlike the Wrath Pun or Greed Goar, wasn't going out of its way to cause havoc. All the adventurers who died in this cave came knowing the risk, while monsters such as Punpuns also died inside due to the natural law of survival of the fittest.

What right did we have to kill a wild monster that only wanted to live, peacefully secluded in its cave?

“Please Kurono-kun... spare me.”

Begged Shirasaki-san, her voice pleading me to show sympathy.

No this *thing* wasn't Shirasaki-san. Actually, I couldn't even be sure if the Lust Rose was as sentient as the people of this world. It might only be using whatever it deemed capable of getting it out of this situation alive.

For instance, since it knew my memories, it could create a person, create words that would prove effective in swaying me. It was doing the same thing as the dream but now in reality.

Which I understood all too well, but faced with such a perfect image and voice of someone dear, I hesitated. I just wasn't able to think I could kill her even if I knew she wasn't the real one.

It was like being told to step on a photo of a family member or a lover. Would it be that easy to mercilessly stomp on the caricature of someone so dear? I couldn't do it. I'd resist even if I was lightly threatened. I'd refuse even if they said I'd get 10,000 yen if I did.

If something that took on her figure so perfectly pleaded with me to spare her, I just couldn't—

"Listen, Shirasaki-san"

I spoke to the something that I knew wasn't her.

"What is it, Kurono-kun?"

The slight tilt of her head as she replied was also impeccably similar. Just how adept at communication was this thing?

Actually, it didn't matter. I didn't need to know.

"Do you know how many people I've killed since I came here?"

"Eh?"

If I met the real Shirasaki-san, if I said that same line to her, would she also react like this fake?

"I killed those white masked bastards, I killed tons of Crusader soldiers. And, I didn't bear any grudge towards them, but I killed my fair share of bandits too."

She didn't reply. She was only listening, no, maybe it just didn't know a reply

for that.

“I didn’t want to, but I also killed them, other experimentees similar to me. I’ve killed other Japanese people——”

At this point, I was just talking as a way to harden my resolve. I might as well be talking to myself.

So I didn’t need her to reply. I didn’t require her input, since *it* didn’t understand.

“—— I’ve chosen my path.”

That’s right, my goals were not so frivolous that I’d get stuck here.

“This is my path. I need power. And I will take it. The power to kill Apostles.”

I readied my sword.

When I raised the Evil Eater EX held in my right hand overhead, the ravenous sword began grinding its teeth in anticipation of the meal it would soon receive.

“Sorry Shirasaki-san——”

That was when she finally understood what I’d been getting at. Opening her eyes wide, Shirasaki-san—— no, the Lust Rose screamed.

“No! Kurono-kun——”

“—— Eat up, Evil Eater EX!”

Suddenly, my eyes opened to show—— a black throne.

I wasn’t even sleeping this time, I just blinked and I was here. Well, anything’s possible I guess.

“Looks like I’ll finally have to deal with *that*... no, first, congratulations on completing the 4th Trial, Kurono Mao.”

Mia Elrod, the Demon King of old gave me words of congratulations with an unusually serious expression.

He was currently dressed in a military uniform that looked a lot like a gakuran and had on a majestic cloak. He was sitting on the grand throne which looked surprisingly fitting as he was currently dressed like a king.

“I am honored by your praise, your Majesty.”

Half going with the flow, and the other half in jest, I put my right fist on my left breast, the Spada salute, and then bowed on one knee, facing the Legendary Demon King I was in the presence of. I’d done this very recently when I received that decoration.

“Ahaha, it’s somewhat embarrassing if you do it so straightforwardly.”

And I’m glad you liked it. Mia-chan’s gentle smile was a healing smile.

“But you were very close to defeat this time around.”

Mia said as he stood from his throne and walked over, his cloak flowing as he did. To this I replied, smiling wryly,

“You’re right, it wasn’t exactly a normal battle.”

All my combat ability felt completely useless in terms of overcoming this one. Heck, I literally didn’t use any of Over Drive, Over Gear or Over Accel.

“Just goes to show, you can’t fight every enemy with muscle.”

“Yeah, it was a learning experience.”

“And what about that dream? Enjoyed it?”

He said something outrageous in an easy smile. A violent jolt went up my spine.

“W-wait... you mean, you saw that too?”

Holy crapper, that’d be... no, but... oh no oh no... shiiiiit, I can’t, I just can’t man...

“Don’t worry, I’m not that insensitive.”

“Y-you swear you didn’t watch?”

I’m dead mentally if he were to kindly say he didn’t mind me having those super embarrassing fantasies. I’d been assuming that Mia was a guy, and if he was, that’d be fine to a certain degree, a very tiny degree. But then, if it turns out that he was actually a she...

“Yes, I swear, alright!”

What's with you, he pouted cutely. Mia-chan denied it clearly so, alright, I'll believe those words, Demon King.

"Right, enough about that. Hurry up and present the proof."

"Eh? Already?"

"Yes, do it. You have it, right?"

Wasn't there supposed to be some sort of ceremony or putting on airs that was supposed to happen at this point? Maybe the rules got changed since I wasn't sleeping?

"Uh... we'll I do, but still..."

But still, what exactly?

Actually, what was up with Mia-chan today anyway? First, he was all serious faced, and now everything he said was all rigid. Like, what's this Demon King playing at being all hard-to-get like that? I mean it's cute but still.

"So do it then, present the proof now."

Practically forced to get on with it, I reached into my Shadow Gate which I could apparently use even in a God's realm, and retrieved the piece that would serve as proof for the Lust Rose's subjugation.

"This should be what you need."

The object in my hand was something that resembled something of a seed and also an egg. A very mysterious ellipsoidal item. It was only 10 or so centimeters big, and almost fully white in color, with a teensy tint of blue.

"Indeed, this Womb of Lust should serve my need for a proof."

Womb. Huh. Well, I mean this thing did come out from the imitation Shirasaki-san's lower abdomen when I cut it down with Evil Eater EX.

I'd imagined that the Lust Rose could even replicate a girl's soft skin, but when I struck it, the body shattered as easy as glass. The imitation was only ice magic on the inside.

That's when I saw that this icy Shirasaki-san was actually connected to the Lust Rose proper from the hips down, and I could see, only in my left eye, a red

indicator on that round object.

I then stabbed the Lust Rose's flower straight down the middle with Evil Eater EX, letting it suck out every ounce of the rank 5 monster's mana.

The Lust Rose withered very easily. It's translucent blue rose petals were no more, and the green vines extending from it, now having lost their source of life, turned a stark white. The hypnotic patterned vines all started withering in a chain reaction and crumbled away into dust. No longer would they entice the unsuspecting adventurer into a land of dreams.

"—— Good, and so I've received it. And with that, my 4th Protection is yours."

As how it always went, the Womb of Lust started vanishing into light particles from my hand.

The 4th huh. I now had more than half of the trials done... it's sort of moving.

"Thanks. So anyway, what exactly does this one do——"

"AHH, AHHH!?"

Right when I was asking what powers I'd received, Mia-chan started yelling. Very, very deliberately.

"What's wrong? Why the sudden yelling?"

"Uhh, lemme think... Ah, that's right! So recently, I went and had sushi after a long while! Last time was 2000 years ago!"

That's quite the generous long while he's got. Everything said and done, he was still a God I guess.

"Ah, sushi. That reminds me, I've been hearing about a new sushi place that opened up in Spada."

"That's the one, yes!"

"Let me guess, you also participated in the grand opening eating contest?"

"Sure did! I was real close to winning too."

From that expression, it looked like he didn't mind losing. I guess it was the fun experience that really mattered. He got to enjoy exorbitant helpings of

sushi after 2000 years without it and got off without the normally inevitable stomach ache that proceeded.

“Sounds like a great place, I’ll make sure to go there once I get back to Spada. So anyway, back to the 4th Protection——”

“AHHH!?”

Once again he’d barred me from speaking.

“What is it this time?”

“Uh, ummm... yes, I know! So it’s about that sushi place again, can you believe this, they don’t have pudding!”

Was that really necessary to talk about right now?

No, he was still of the Gods so his words might just hold some deeper meaning. Who knows, this could even be a clue to my next Trial, right?

“When I ordered it, they said they didn’t serve pudding and I... I was so sad.”

The hell man, he was just talking about him being stupid. Like getting your picture taken doing a double peace sign with a weird face.

“Alright, don’t be so depressed about it. Let me tell you about this store called Sweet Smile. It’s in Spada’s upper stratum and it’s not cheap. Just one costs 1,500 klans, but I guarantee they’re worth the price.”

“Oh, didn’t know about that! Thanks, I’ll go there as soon as I can!”

“It’s a popular store, so good luck getting one before they run out.”

Actually, what’s a God doing fussing over pudding anyway. Grow up.

“Alright, enough about pudding, I just want to talk about the Protec——”

“LALALA!”

And a third time. He was being so obviously deliberate, it wasn’t funny anymore. If he was going to be this way, I might as well push.

“Look, can you just tell me why you’ve been avoiding the topic like this?”

“... W-who’s avoiding what?”

Now, say that again, but looking at me this time.

It appears that the Legendary Demon King wasn't exactly a master at deception. A bead of nervous sweat flowed down his cheek while his large, red eyes swam around, avoiding my direction.

"Give it to me straight, is the 4th Divine Protection a really weird power?"

I was half suspecting it to be, honestly. With the way this 4th monster was, using stealthy mind manipulation and even begging to be spared in the end, I didn't think I'd be getting another straightforward power-up.

"I mean, I guess you could call it weird..."

Even now that we're finally on topic, Mia-chan was being difficult like this. This power must have some bad downsides, looking at his face.

"I mean, since Over Gear is about physical defense, I was hoping the 4th one provided mental defenses, like against Telepathy and other mind control. Is that wrong?"

"No you're right, it does include that sort of power."

"So it's not the main ability."

Correct, he said, looking a bit apologetic. But Mia-chan stopped talking about it there, without going into further details.

Seriously, what's he hiding from me...

"So is it like, I'll be able to use this power to hypnotize and control other people as I will?"

If so, I could think of more than a few criminal applications for a power like that. Even I would hesitate in using it like that, since if I did, I might just go down a very wrong path.

If I had that kind of power in my hands, I could get the real Shirasaki-san to talk to me like she did in the dream. No no, I wouldn't dare attempt to recreate that dream scenario in real life, even if I had the means to. That was out of the question. I was only fantasizing a little, believe me!

"Oh no, it's not that convenient."

"Ah, of course."

No, it's better this way. Controlling people was the exact opposite to my principles. After all, I'd experienced first hand the horror of those damn Angel Rings.

"Then what is it, just tell me already."

"Ugh... it's, well it's..."

"I mean, you even told me the names right away when I got Gear and Accel, and it'd be better if I could at least get some hands-on practice——"

"P-p-practice!? No no no, you can't do that! I'm serious here, just for this one, you can't practice it here!!"

His face went beet red as he firmly refused my right to practice. Holy shit, just how bad is this power? How bad does it have to be that I can't even practice... I mean, shouldn't it be more dangerous to only use it in battle?

Actually, if even Mia-chan's this nervous about me using it, I'm sure Lily and Fiona would get a shocker too. I just remembered how epic of a fail I had after I suddenly pulled out the Plasma Blaster.

"Alright fine. You don't have to help me practice, but at least tell me its name and what it does."

"Urk... can it just be the name?"

"No, I really need that second one too."

Because of course I did. It was obvious that this power wasn't a simple power-up, and I seriously didn't want to have to try a million different things to discover its effects.

"O-okay, I get it. I'll tell you the gist of the 4th power, plain and simple."

"Yup, thanks."

Then, after a long 10 seconds of silence, Mia-chan quietly spoke,

"Okay, so... my 4th Divine Protection. Its power is..."

"Yes, go on?"

"S... se... "

“Se?”

“S-sex! It makes you great at sex!!”

“... eh?”

Chapter 394: Snowy Mountain Introspection

The moment I killed the Lust Rose, the whole cave started coming down—— well no, that didn't happen, but anyway, I hoisted the still sleeping Lily and Fiona on my back and started heading on my way out.

This cave would no longer be a Rank 5 danger zone that left no survivors. The patterned vines had all dried up, so their hypnotic effect was gone. As for the pink smog that made it easy for the monster to use its Illusion magic, that should also disperse soon enough.

Practically nothing was left of the now withered Lust Rose. I'd already handed over its Womb of Lust as proof for the Trial. That had been its center, much like a Slime's core, so the other parts of its body were now drained of all their mana and didn't look at all useful as crafting materials.

In a way, it died cleanly, without any of the usual gore involved. I couldn't help but think that it should rest in peace.

By the time I exited the cave, it was well past afternoon, and after walking for a while longer, the sun was beginning to sink behind the pristine Asbel peaks.

I decided to set up camp at the base of a large coniferous tree, the type you'd see in front of the train stations during Christmas in Japan. I prepared the tent and laid Lily and Fiona inside as they were still fast asleep.

The fight with the Lust Rose almost completely lacked any physical effort, so I wasn't tired at all. The only real injury I received was from Evil Eater, and some mana was used up because... wait, that was Evil Eater too!

Fine, we can call it even since it did most of the work this time around.

My shoulder wound was sealed in Flesh Compensation gel, and was recovering surprisingly fast. At this rate, it should be fully healed by tomorrow morning.

It's at times like these that I really get to grasp just how superhuman I've become.

With such thoughts, I silently continued the night watch. There are some

really annoying Punpuns around these parts, and if you're too careless, they can easily sneak close and steal your stuff.

Of course, staying up wasn't going to be an issue for me. It wasn't like I had to defeat hundreds of monsters like in the battle for Iskia and my body wasn't one to let me down.

So there'd be no bad luck event where I accidentally fell asleep— although I still went on a trip to Mia-chan's Avalon palace when I blinked. But the real shocking thing was what I learned... no, let's concern myself with more important things. Namely, Lily and Fiona.

A few hours after I began my watch, it was in the dead of the night when both of them awoke.

I could sense them waking up inside the tent. Well, that and I could also hear them rustling out of their bedrolls.

"Hey there, you two had a good sleep?"

I knew that they were fine of course, but I couldn't help but worry, and so I peeked inside the tent just to make sure.

"Ah... Kurono."

"Kurono, -san..."

The moment they saw me, they were all smiles— which only lasted an instant. Both of them changed to sad but also apologetic expressions, Lily diverting her gaze while Fiona looked down.

"What's wrong? Do you still feel tired?"

"I'm, fine."

Lily answered slowly, still in her lovely, white Pun-robe outfit. Her mind seemed to have switched to adult Lily as her tone of speech became mature in contrast to her appearance.

"I as well, nothing to worry about."

Fiona indicated that she was alright too. I'd taken off her trademark three-cornered hat since she was sleeping, so I could clearly see her face. Her

expression wasn't exactly happy but her face didn't look pale or like anything that could indicate status ailments.

Still, the fact was that they were both physically fine but still depressed, and the reason for that could only be——

“I'm sorry, Kurono.”

“We weren't any use at all this time.”

Both girls apologized.

Oh, of course. No wonder they were so down. That being the reason actually relieved me a little.

“Don't worry about it. We're a party right? Sometimes you save me, and sometimes I save you.”

“No, this time, it's because I was too careless.”

“Yes, I also must've thought we could handle any monster now that we all had our own Divine Protections.”

I'd gotten 2 of those at once in the battle for Iskia, while the two of them had also trained very hard (I'm assuming) to receive their own Protections.

And when we combined our powers, it became something truly tremendous. We saw just how powerful it was when we easily crushed a Rank 5 Lich in one of our quests. Our Divine Protections combined, we had created formation Anticross, a state in which we could even beat Apostles.

But maybe I was the one who'd let it get to my head the most. I didn't say it, and didn't even outwardly think it, but in the back of my head, I must've built up an idea that we could easily beat something on the level of mere Trial monsters if we were so strong already.

And this was the result of my conceit. I had to be saved by Hitsugi and Evil Eater—— my only job this time around was lightly swinging my sword to finish off the weak real body of the Lust Rose.

I wasn't going to proudly claim that I beat the Lust Rose on my own, because I clearly hadn't.

“Actually, I would’ve turned out the same. You could say I only won by luck.”

And so, I told them how I escaped the dream and finished the battle.

“— But I still say that you saved us.”

“And you even carried us this far, I’m so happ— No, embarrassed that I had you do that, Kurono-san.”

The reason Fiona almost slipped the word ‘happy’ in there must’ve been because she wanted to express her gratitude to me as a party member. I’d be happy too if one of them saved me, so the word really resonated in me. I felt that our bonds of companionship had become very strong.

“I agree that we need to reflect on it, but not right now. I got my Trial done and got that new Protection too, which is what we came here for. Let’s be happy about that first.”

I said, trying to convince them but I knew that emotions couldn’t be changed on a whim like that. Still, Lily and Fiona smiled as if to say they’d try.

They thanked me and I was relieved hearing it. It just hurt me to see them looking so sad so I was glad—

“So, Kurono, this will be your, 1, 2... 4th Divine Protection, right? What sort of power is it?”

“I’m very interested in that too. Who knows, we might even be able to strengthen our Anticross formation with it.”

“N-No no no we can’t!”

I yelled. I really didn’t mean to yell but I yelled.

Lily and Fiona first looked wide-eyed, but quickly changed to expressions of suspicion at my clearly strange reaction.

“... We can’t what exactly?” Lily questioned.

“Yes, please explain.” And Fiona concurred.

I couldn’t force my way out of this one. I knew that I shouldn’t keep secrets, especially from these two... no, but, that didn’t mean I could just speak to them frankly about this kind of power... uh, that’s right, while they were certainly my

trusted companions, that didn't mean I'd have to tell them anything and everything. Even Lily and Fiona hadn't told me what kind of training they did in Avalon.

So I had to talk my way out of this, or die trying!

"Right, okay... so it's like, you know how the Lust Rose had Illusion based powers? This Protection is like that."

"Do you mean, something like showing nightmares to the target?"

"Or is it something like my Telepathy, can you do that now too?"

"Thing is, I don't really get it myself."

I half expected them to bite back at me for making such a bad lie and tell me to make a better one, but what I said was, in fact, the truth.

"Look, I can now do pseudo-ice magic, that's something, right?"

I claimed as I began releasing cold air from a palm. I wasn't making ice, but just gathering low temperature black magic on my palm so that the surrounding air would get chilled.

"Hmm, yes, it certainly feels cold. Interesting."

Fiona said as she tightly held my hand in both of hers. I knew it wasn't too flashy, but this should be enough to prove to them that I could now use the ice element.

"Hey! How long are you planning on holding his hand, he's not done explaining."

Fiona hadn't released her hold on my hand, and we'd somehow gone with the mood and ended up staring into each other's eyes while holding hands. Lily's quick and precise quip of course broke us out of that stupor as we let each other go.

"Ah..."

Fiona let out a small, sort of longing voice, as our hands parted.

Maybe the temperature inside the tent was too warm and she felt the coldness of my hand comforting? When I laid them to sleep inside the tent, I'd

used a heater-like magic item so they wouldn't freeze. One of these cost 10,000 Klans so they were relatively expensive items. They were also consumables.

"Let's get back on track. So I now have Drive, Gear and Accel. All three of those use their respective elements to boost my physical fighting ability, and are pretty easy to use now that I got the hang of them. And since I've also been learning Model magic, I've been able to further strengthen them to a degree."

All this they already knew. Both Lily and Fiona only nodded silently.

"But with this one, I'll have to figure out how I'm supposed to use ice to cause Illusion magic, and I have no idea how to even get started on that."

Illusion spells were already called a special type of magic. In terms of Model magic, Illusion had spells such as Panikos, Charm and Berserk.

But in practical terms, most Illusion magic that pulled their weight in battle were various forms of Extra or very powerful Original magics, so most people just couldn't use this sub-division of the arcane. In addition, it was very difficult to teach Illusion magic, and in many cases, the student couldn't even use it.

"And apparently, because I have no talent for Illusion, the Demon King straight up told me that I can't do any of the things that the Lust Rose was doing, no joke."

Mia-chan also told me that he couldn't do those things either, so this power most likely didn't include those abilities in the first place. I wasn't very disappointed hearing this as I honestly thought that I was expecting too much from it.

"What, so," Lily said doubtfully, "does that mean the Protection is useless?"

"It's still mainly supposed to improve my mental defenses. If I use it, I should be safe from all kinds of Illusion or the sort... in theory."

I wasn't lying about that either. The 4th Protection isn't so convenient that it would passively shield me from any mental attack, but during the time I have it activated, it should give me strong mental barriers against Illusion spells, similar to the spell, Protect.

Mental defense being a main ability of the 4th protection was also not a lie.

Mia-chan told me this himself.

“In other words, you’re saying it will be useless unless the opponent actually uses that sort of magic.” Fiona complained.

“That’s the gist of it, yeah.”

Frankly, it’d be useless against Sarel, since she’s the type that comes in close and personal with her spear. She’s more akin to a Knight class than Mage. All the stories that Fiona heard of Sarel back when she was in the Sinclair Republic revolved around the 7th Apostle always diving head first into the enemy ranks and taking the heads of their generals.

But the 4th Protection should be very useful against that Madonna Charm, the Bad Status that was afflicted on Vulcan before he was killed. I’d seen it as part of Vulcan’s nightmare when I Blackened the Evil Eater after it had turned into a cursed weapon.

“Well, I think it’s not bad that you have a solid defense. We *did* all fall for the Lust Rose’s mental trickery, so it should serve well against similar enemies.” Lily concluded.

She was right, it did in fact cover a hole in our defenses so we could consider it more of a merit.

Fiona’s eyes were still telling me that it was not that big of a leap in strength but I ignored her for now.

Right now, you could say I was lying, so I couldn’t afford to make any actions that made me look suspicious.

“And like I said already, I have practically no talent in it, so using it might lead to disastrous results. This means I can’t practice it safely on other people either. You guys should know about the dangers of triggering an Overflow, and with how powerful Protections are, it might even affect nearby allies.”

“I think I should be able to defend myself even if that happens...” Lily contemplated, “but if you insist, I won’t press the issue.”

“Agreed.”

And it looks like I succeeded in convincing them.

I was beyond relieved. The true power of the 4th Protection was something that I, under no circumstances, could have them find out——

“That reminds me, Fiona, I need to talk to you about something. *Alone.*”

“That’s very convenient, I was thinking the same, Lily-san.”

With that mountain of trouble now behind us, Lily suddenly proposed to have a private chat with Fiona and Fiona even agreed.

“What’s all this about?”

“We need to reflect on what happened today. We realize that we were very useless this time, so can we please do it alone?”

Lily said in an especially somber expression. Her figure still being that of a little girl with even her Punpun ears drooping down in sorrow, just looking at her started making me sad too.

But I could see where she was coming from. They surely needed some closure in terms of their performance this time around.

“Alright, guess I’ll step out then.”

“No, we will have our discussion outside and we can continue the night watch in your place. So please rest here inside the tent, Kurono-san.”

“No really, I’m fine going outside. You two need more rest than——”

“Kurono-san, please, if you treat us too kindly, we... well, you just shouldn’t. That goes for both me and Lily-san.”

Fiona said, showing just how strong her heart was. It only proved that she’d firmly resolved to be better.

“Got it, you two have a good chat then. We’ll leave at sunrise.”

“Yes.”

“Sure.”

Lily, in her white Pun-robe, and Fiona, still without her hat, exited the tent.

I wasn’t so crass as to eavesdrop on their private conversation, so I shut out the faint voices from outside and laid down.

I felt too lazy to take out my own bedroll from inside my Shadow Gate so I just wrapped myself around the blanket that Lily and Fiona were using.

With my body as it was, I didn't feel particularly cold, but the warmth and texture of a blanket was perfect for relaxing on the way to a good sleep.

Which was when the scent of the two girls, who were under this piece of cloth until only recently, tingled my nose, and I felt strangely captivated by it.

"Shit... this is all because of that new Protection..."

Mia-chan had gone completely red in the face when he declared that the true power of this Protection was, and I quote, 'It makes you great at sex!!'

I was so shocked that I just stayed silent for a solid 30 seconds before thinking that no, this was my power, and I had to make him explain it no matter what.

So I turned my heart to stone. I grabbed Mia-chan by the cloak as he tried to hide behind his big throne out of embarrassment, and demanded that he explain it further. Thinking back, the scene must've looked as if I was hungrily assaulting a delicate girl, but no one was there to witness, so surely it doesn't count.

Anyway, so this is how it went:

"Y-you misunderstand!"

"Really, that's your excuse, for giving me the power to 'have great sex'!"

"Uh, I mean, it does do that... but it's not like I came up with it because I'm a pervert, because I'm not!"

"Why in the world, then, would you come up with this, huh!?"

"Uh, well, it was when..."

"When what?"

"It was when I got tossed into a Succubus nest, alright!? I had to fight off the Queen... and her 1000 daughter Succubi."

I felt my tension completely drop as he gave me the insane reason involved, diverting his gaze from me with an indescribably awkward expression.

"Holy crap, so that story was true..."

Once upon a time, Demon King Mia Elrod fell into one of his enemies cowardly traps, this one involving him being thrown into a sanctum of Succubi completely in the nude. The myriad of Succubi, creatures that lived by feasting on male essence, including their Queen, who was fascinated by the androgynous figure of the Demon King, all assaulted him simultaneously.

But Mia Elrod prevailed, vanquishing the devourers of men at their own game with his peerless stamina and technique fit to be called Demon King class. He took on the challenge head on and came out victorious—— it was one of the more 18+ of the Demon Lord's adventures that were obviously not taught to young children.

This tale of this unimaginably lewd scenario that evoked the desires of men had been passed down throughout the ages in all of Pandora, and many (male oriented) works of fiction have since been published based on the contents of the legend. Will was the one who told me about this tale with an incredibly dirty grin on his face. It was in one of our bro to bro moments where he promised to one day show me his proud collection.

All that said and done, this story was still way too fantastical for even me to believe, and most other people also took it as fiction. Well, now I knew different...

“Ugh... So it's still being circulated, after all these years...”

And the fact it was true was only bolstered by that aghast expression I could see on his Royal Demonic Highness' face.

The first thought that popped into my head was that I absolutely must have Mia-chan tell me just in what way he went around *vanquishing* so many of the lewd enchantresses, but I suppressed that welling desire. I had a feeling that our relationship would never be the same again if he actually told me.

As an aside, this event might seem to finally reveal Mia-chan's actual sex, but that was not the case.

Succubi could absorb the essence from both males and females if they so desired it. So in reality, whether the victim is a man or women or anywhere in between, they could still technically be a victim of a Succubus.

“What am I gonna do with this anyway...”

And so I squeezed all the details about my new Divine Protection out of Mia-chan. It had turned into something similar to sexual harassment in the middle but I was able learn that it held similar effects to Protect so, that being the only decent one out of the new abilities, I at least had something to tell Lily and Fiona.

And the part I absolutely can't tell them about is the one where it makes me 'great at sex' as Mia-chan described it.

The most formal way I could even begin to explain it is by saying it's a type of Love Craft.

Love Crafts are a genre of magic that worked via sexual intercourse. The techniques used by Succubi where they absorb mana from a man or how they entice the man into sharing their mana all on their own fall into this category.

Inducing the Charm effect by drowning them in pleasures of the flesh was also a good example.

But all these Love Crafts essentially involve sex in one way or another and it was completely not OK to discuss them in public. Frankly speaking, it's even considered an illegal form of magic, sometimes even called forbidden arts and are often outlawed. Any mage worth their salt would never try learning them anyway, and the only people who do would be Shamans or Pagan Priests. Really, everything about it is either fishy, or just plain dangerous.

And *that* was what I got as a Divine Protection.

My patron Demon King said that with this power, I should be able to hold a cold and reasoning countenance even when blasted by a Succubus' enchanting prowess, in turn allowing me to turn the tables on it, and show by force of flesh just what is that hell known as irresistible pleasure— like, seriously, give me a break with the eroticism already...

Anyway, I can only hope that I won't need to practically use this Protection, ever, if possible. When I do have that sort of relationship with a girl, I'd very much like it to be normal.

“You know... I really hate you sometimes, Mia-chan...”

I knew that he didn't mean anything bad by giving me this power, but my feelings on the whole matter were still conflicted. Various thoughts circulating in my head, I drifted into sleep with the warm blanket enveloping me.

Chapter 395: Snowy Mountain Girl Talk

In the dead of the snowy night, Lily and Fiona sat down in front of the crackling campfire, having left Kurono to sleep back inside the tent.

A nearby uprooted tree made for a perfect seat where Fiona elegantly rested her laurels and Lily bounced in to sit next to her.

“So, how was it?”

They looked like a pair of affectionate sisters as they sat leaning shoulder to shoulder, but the words Lily used to break the ice contained trace amounts of venom. She wasn’t directing hostility at the witch, but rather a strong frustration at herself for having failed so badly.

“It was good. So good in fact that I ended up sleeping in.”

Fiona said in her usual monotone, which seemed to also carry a tinge of self-resentment.

“Right, that thing showed us a dream so perfect that we didn’t even want to resist.”

Lily sighed, exhaling a small puff of white breath. Fiona kept silent.

A further moment of silence passed. Lily once again muttered,

“... Care to tell me about it?”

“... I will say this first: I am very sorry.”

Fiona said as if she’d committed a crime. She subconsciously reached up to her hat, wanting to hide her face— only to find that the three-cornered head attire was missing.

“Wait, why are you apologizing?”

“Lily-san, you died in my dream.”

“HUH!?”

Lily briskly stood up, utterly shocked at having learned of her unfortunate state within Fiona’s scenario.

“This is why I apologized first.”

“That’s not the problem here! What’s with that, why am I dead!? I can’t believe you’d be so heartless!”

“Then what about you, Lily-san, how did I turn out in your dream?”

“Uh, well...”

Lily was visibly stuck on words. But she soon mustered up enough courage to speak honestly as well.

“In mine, Kurono and I got married, and you were there congratulating us.”

“I’d rather you kill me off than have me say that.”

Fiona stated crossly.

“It’s better than being dead. You were even a rank 5 Adventurer, you know? While Kurono and I were still at rank 2.”

“Wait just a moment, are you implying that I was still solo adventuring?”

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

Lily was full of energy again, giving Fiona a big helping of her cutesy fairy smile.

“You could’ve made Element Masters with me, couldn’t you?”

“Eh~, no way, if I did that, I couldn’t spend my forever and ever after living happily married with Kurono in our nice little house in the Fairy Garden.”

“And what’s this about marriage? Lily-san, weren’t you getting ahead of yourself? I myself had only started as lovers, a much more modest approach in my opinion.”

The witch proclaimed, proudly puffing out her chest, to which the fairy retorted valiantly.

“*Modest?* I can’t believe you Fiona. There’s no way you didn’t spend all day with Kurono, holding hands, kissing, having lots of— —”

Lily, who at first had an admonishing face, had suddenly gotten her cheeks dyed a burning pink.

On the other hand, Fiona's own face had also blushed red all over. She tried to hide it by facing away but it was plainly obvious.

“——K-kyaah!! H-how could you do such dirty things with Kurono!”

Lily, with her telepathic abilities, had caught a glimpse.

A glimpse into exactly how Fiona and Kurono had spent their lives together as lovers. That very moment, the scenes that rose up inside Fiona's mind were those of her hot and passionate days as she and her boyfriend lived under the same roof.

It is important to note that Fiona, as she was a genuine maiden witch with no previous experience with men, didn't quite have the appropriate know-how to correctly imagine such actions. But the Lust Rose had the ability to take her vague mental picture and turn it into a satisfactory dream. The rank 5 monster could provide full guidance to any lady or gentleman with their virginity still intact.

As proof, even the blurred image that Fiona saw during her liaison with Kurono happened to be too overpowering for the still innocent and pure of heart (32 year old) Fairy Lily.

“I-I can't believe this! Kurono a-and, yo-you——”

“K-keep your voice down, Lily-san. He might hear you if you're too loud.”

Some more brouhaha later, the two of them finally settled down.

They went and checked inside the tent and found Kurono asleep. They concluded that he must not have heard the commotion or its contents.

“*Haah... haah...* Fine, let's just forget about the dreams.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

The two girls calmed their breathing and sat back down on the uprooted tree. Once the spat was over, they only felt empty.

After all, it was all just dreams, fantasies, figments of their imagination. All of it was just an illusion that had no influence on reality.

Most importantly, both of them didn't actually want a Kurono that was made

to be convenient to their desires. They couldn't pass away their time wading in their fantasies when the real Kurono was waiting to be conquered in reality.

"Lily-san, by the way, um..."

"W-what. You're still planning on asking more awkward questions?"

Lily didn't want any more embarrassment, and showed Fiona the wry version of her fairy smile.

"I wanted to know what kind of dream Kurono-san saw."

Fiona was implicitly asking whether Lily had read into his mind when they were talking just now.

Lily stared at her seriously for a moment, but afterwards, she gave an answer.

"Ah that, I saw only a glimpse of it, but I have a general idea."

"And? What was it like?"

"Let's see, Kurono and I were living together happily married. That kind of nice dream."

"Yes that's funny, but please tell me the truth now."

Lily pouted at how Fiona just wrote it off like that but—— she then sighed in resignation and told her the truth.

"He dreamed of his home."

Fiona might've been expecting that, as she showed no surprise and simply answered, "I see."

But from how she sighed deeply right afterwards, it could be assumed that she was more conflicted than she let on.

"Did Kurono-san, perhaps have——"

"Stop!"

Fiona's words were cut off by Lily's sharp, but almost desperate sounding, outcry.

"Stop, please just, don't... say that."

"I apologize. I misspoke."

Lily held her head, her expression distraught to the point of tears welling up. Fiona was close to crying herself, despite coming out with the idea.

Did Kurono-san perhaps have a desire to return home—— no, that wasn't it. What Fiona had attempted to say had much worse implications.

Did Kurono-san perhaps have... the continuation would've gone as follows:

“—— *a girl he loved, back home?*”

They'd already learned from Kurono himself that he had not been married. But on the matter of lovers, a girl that he may have loved, they hadn't asked him.

Out of simple fear, both Lily and Fiona, just couldn't dare to ask him.

“... It's alright. Kurono-san said that he won't return home.”

“Mm.”

“I'm sure that he'd never leave us and go away.”

“Yes... you're, right...”

Thank you, said Lily in a tiny voice, but her sentiment had reached Fiona.

Leaning shoulder to shoulder, the two girls spent the rest of the night in mutual silence. A silence that they used to strengthen their hearts, and embolden their resolve.

They didn't want to go against Kurono's desires, so they wouldn't stop him if he wanted to return home. But what they *could* do was make him feel as if he'd never need to.

They would absolutely make him look their way—— no, that wasn't enough. They could do better.

Because Lily, and because Fiona, was right there, with him, for him. *Because you Kurono cannot choose anyone but me.* Lily/Fiona

But on the way to that, first they had to——

“Hokay, let's have another good day, for Kurono.”

“Yes, for Kurono-san.”

The sun began rising up in the horizon.

And within the day, the Element Masters had descended the Asbel Mountain Range of snow, ice and illusion.

Chapter 396: Meanwhile...

It was the 25th of Frozen Soil. By noon we had fully descended the mountain and arrived back at Asbel Village where the people seemed to be worked up about something.

It wasn't the strenuous dread that came with the announcement of an Emergency Quest but more, yes, more like a festival. Everyone had expressions of joy.

"Did news of us beating the Lust Rose reach here already... yeah not likely."

We hadn't even reported it to the adventurer's guild yet, so there was really no way for the villagers to know.

Plus, the Lust Rose may have been a powerful rank 5 monster, but it didn't move from its cave, so the village had practically no reason to fear it. Whether they left it alone or had it subjugated, it made no difference in their lives.

"Though it does feel that they are celebrating a large monster subjugation."

Fiona said as we walked along the village's main street lined with wooden houses and storefronts with roofs layered thick in snow. I agreed, it did have that sort of atmosphere.

As we passed by I heard some villagers wearing thick fur coats talking about how relieved they were or how quickly they'd done it and other such topics all with satisfied smiles on their faces. Children ran along playing subjugation quest with some being monsters and some being adventurers.

"Must be Wing Road."

"Oh right, they'd also taken a quest hadn't they... I don't seem to recall what though."

I couldn't actually remember either, but it became sort of obvious soon enough.

We had arrived at the guild that stood right along central plaza of the village.

And at the center of that plaza there laid the corpse of a huge monster,

proving to the villagers that it had been subjugated without a doubt.

“Whoa, that’s one big wolf...”

“Ah!” yelled Lily, “that’s a Fenrir~!”

That’s when I remember that they said they were doing the ‘Fenrir Subjugation.’

Lily was pointing at the monster, the giant wolf with silver fur that had been tied with thick ropes to a wooden framework that made its body splay out on the ground.

From head to tailbone, it appeared to be around 5 meters long. Its tail was fluffy like that of a fox and fell out of the framework due to its length.

And although it had been displayed there to prove that it was dead, its fur still kept a beautiful gloss, like a pristine field of snow that reflected back the sunlight.

“Fenrirs were quite famous in Sinclair as well,” Fiona claimed, “From the size of that one, I believe it may still be growing, but it should already be strong enough to be classified as a rank 5.”

“You sure seem to know a lot. Have you fought one before?” I asked.

“No, I’ve only had the chance to watch, once, as a child. I remember being in a warm hut eating oranges while my Sensei fought a fully grown one in solo combat.”

She said it like she was lazing around with a few mandarins while watching a variety show on New Years. But her being so casual about it meant that this Sensei must’ve been so strong that it was fine to let a child watch while they handled it.

“Anyway, looks like they did it pretty cleanly.”

I could barely find any blood on the giant corpse. There were only 2 wounds I could see distinctly.

The first of which was a deep stab wound at the center of its forehead. From the size of the hole I could assume that Nero was responsible. It was a clean, pinpoint attack that fit his image.

The second wound was a long gash across the beast's abdomen. This one was obviously Kai's handiwork as it looked to have been done in one fell stroke using his incredible strength. His style contrasted that of Nero but his strength was close if not on par with the Avalonian prince.

"Kurono-san, if it were you, wouldn't you have decapitated it?"

Wait, just what kind of monster do you think I... I wanted to retort to her, but realized that it wasn't that bad a prediction.

Since a Fenrir is supposed to be very agile, I'd first go for its legs. Then to finish it off, I'd lop off its head.

"You're right. I'd even go as far as to crush it after lopping it off, just to make sure."

Too many times have I had an enemy attack me even after they got decapitated. Whether it was Saeed or the Greed Goar, they didn't want to end the fight after the point where it would otherwise end. Crazy stuff.

"Interesting, so it seems you've finally awakened to your calling as a Berserker, is that it?"

"Wait, hold up, my Class is still——"

I had wanted to correct her, saying that I was still technically a Black Mage, but then,

"Ah! Kurono-kun~!"

I heard a familiar, sweet, songbird of a voice calling out to me.

I turned towards the voice, expecting to see loose, white robes, a pair of white wings, the one and only, the Healing Princess——

"Mumuu!!"

"Kyan!?"

—— Flinching back from Lily's expected flash attack.

"A-are you alright, Nell?"

"... Yes, I'm fine, Kurono-kun."

Nell was still staggering as she made a smile with some difficulty while I grabbed on to the mischievous Lily who kept going *Grrr* at the princess.

“Kurono-san, I believe it’s time we go report to the guild.”

Fiona was now tugging at my sleeve, strongly demanding that we go to the guild. She was acting as if Nell wasn’t even there.

“Uh, hey, we’re not in that much of a hur—”

“Well then, your Highness, goodbye.”

“Oh the guild. Then I shall go with you. I too had an appointment there, so let us head there together.”

Replied Nell with a radiant smile, to which Fiona stopped walking and also stopped tugging on my sleeve.

“... Kurono-san, we can go to the guild later. How about we have lunch?”

Fiona suddenly changed her mind without showing the slightest change of expression.

But I noticed. It was quick but I noticed the ever so slight twitch of her brow.

Oh no. That was a sure sign that she was angry.

“Lunch, is it? I actually happen to know a very good restaurant that should suit your needs, I shall guide you.”

Nell’s angelic smile seemed to convey that she’d be more than happy to treat us too what with all the reward money they had received for the Fenrir quest.

The intensity of that smile utterly prevented me from voicing the obvious doubt as to whether it was okay to miss her guild appointment.

“Ah, of, course, you do...”

And then, the moment I turned my gaze back to Fiona, my spine froze over. Her eyes held a dangerous golden glint.

I recalled the image of a girl endlessly bashing her staff into a long deceased catkin.

“Take a—”

“Fiona!”

I shut her mouth. Pretty much forcefully, I used my hand to cover Fiona’s mouth. I had to prevent her from going any further, or else.

The sudden infringement left her so bewildered that her golden eyes were blinking repeatedly as she let out moaning sounds from behind my hand.

She should’ve gotten back to her senses now, or rather, had those senses diverted.

“Sorry, but I need you to calm down and listen.”

I said in a quiet voice, fully turning my back to Nell as if to tell her to please hold on a moment as we sort things out.

Blocking Fiona’s mouth obviously meant that I’d have to let go of the previously rampaging Lily, but for the moment, it seemed that Lily read the mood and wasn’t going to cause trouble. Even her little girl self understood that Fiona needed some handling right now.

“Kurono-san, I’d like to remind you not to act so overfamiliar with *her*.”

“Yes, I know you two told me not to do that, but I think it’s better not to be rude, especially here.”

I had no doubt in my mind that Fiona was about to say something along the lines of, ‘Go take a hike already, you insufferable bitch.’

I admit that I was late to notice until a sort of boiling point was almost reached during that back and forth, but as the party’s leader, I had to at least make sure the members are under control.

Most importantly because the reason this was happening in the first place was due to Nell’s social standing.

“Look, we’re not in Spada now, this is Avalon territory. Even if careless remarks can be waved off at the Academy, they might not be so lenient in their home turf.”

“That’s... no, you’re right...”

I personally wanted to be friendly with Nell and speak casually with her, but I

knew that it wouldn't be right to get so close to royalty. Fiona tried to prevent that and so ended up getting heated up.

But behaving rudely to her wasn't the right way to do it. In fact, it would get us the opposite result since my avoiding Nell was done for the sake of our positions, not because I actually wanted to avoid her.

Which was why I'd gotten them to accept her as my tutor for Model magic. Learning to use my Divine Protections was more important than wading through politics.

"I can deal with this. You two please go to the guild ahead of me. I'll have a short chat with her, say bye, and go to you right away, how's that sound?"

The contents of my words sounded like I was almost betraying the friendship Nell and I had.

I felt really bad, guilty even, now that I had come out and said it... But that was just what it meant to have friendship across social barriers.

Fiona, who couldn't know my suffering as I tried to balance my modern Japanese values with the realities of this world, groaned as she considered my words. Of course, she'd reach the same conclusion too, and she knew that. This was the optimal and most peaceful way to resolve the conflict.

"You have 10 minutes, Kurono. No more."

While the witch still deliberated, the small fairy with an adult's mind answered in her stead. Lily had switched her conscience.

"10 minutes... can't I have a little more time?"

I mean, it wouldn't hurt to just talk to her for a while, would it?

"10 minutes is all the time we can keep the other Wing Road members away."

"OK, got it. I'll make sure to finish up in 10 minutes."

Oh crap, I'd completely forgotten about the others, especially that overprotective brother of hers.

If he were to see me and Nell alone together again, well, I didn't want to deal with that mess.

Which was why Lily had proposed that the two of them would watch out for any of them coming this way and try to somehow distract them.

Adult Lily was as impressive as ever.

“Alright, see you soon—— Kurono~! We’ll be at the guild!”

Chirped Lily as she perfectly switched back to her innocent little girl mind. She pulled Fiona along to go do their part of the deal.

Seeing it again, I’m amazed as always at how instant that switching is... Makes me question if the real Lily is only acting the little girl every time. She wasn’t right?

“Ah, don’t pull, Lily-san...”

Fiona didn’t look as keen on the plan but she was nevertheless pulled away by the brightly smiling Lily who had a firm grip on the witch’s robe.

She looked back at me 3 times before both of them finally entered the snow-covered adventurer’s guild on Asbel Village.

Geez you guys, I’m just talking with her, you make it way too big a deal.

“Sorry about that Nell, Fiona’s still, how should I say this... cautious, around you.”

“Oh no, I don’t mind that, I don’t mind at all, so you don’t need to apologize for anything.”

She replied, smiling elegantly as expected. She really was an angel.

I did try to whisper while I had that party meeting just now, but her smile was so radiant that I could believe that she wouldn’t mind even if she had heard everything we had said.

“I understand that some adventurers are not exactly fond of royalty or nobles in general. It’s a very common occurrence.”

That kind of attitude being ‘common’ to her basically implied that she had gotten used to it. Being a princess must be tough...

“But enough about that. It has been a while since we’ve been together, just the two of us. I’m... um, it makes me a little... happy.”

Nell voiced as she drew in bashfully, becoming red at her pale cheeks.

The completely blatant girl-in-love behaviour caught me off guard for an instant— No, I can handle this, I won't misunderstand anything. I know that Nell doesn't feel that way so I'll be a gentleman about it.

"These days, Lily's been practically stuck to me, so I guess it got a bit awkward."

It was a scenario where you're with one of your good friends and another friend who doesn't really get along with the first friend comes in and the whole experience is not a pleasant one. In short, a friend's friend is not necessarily your friend.

I've had an intimate relationship with that scenario back in high school.

My pal Saika, unlike me, was actually a very sociable guy, and at times when I talked to him outside class, other people he knew would inevitably join in. There were also times where I'd be talking so someone in the literature club, and they suddenly directed the topic to Shirasaki-san. And Shirasaki-san being Shirasaki-san, she'd engage in our conversation even if she might be scared of me... I always felt really guilty when that happened.

I realized that I was suddenly reminiscing again. Maybe it was due to the Lust Rose's dream, who knows.

Anyway, I'm saying I understand what Nell felt in between friends like that. I knew all too well that it wasn't a comfortable feeling. So of course, she'd be happy but also embarrassed at having to talk like this.

"No really, I'm..."

Nell started fidgeting even more bashfully, seeming to understand that I understood. I strongly felt the importance of mutual understanding among friends.

Alright, no need to dwell on this understanding of awkwardness any more than necessary. I needed to change the topic already, as a friend.

"So, Wing Road got the Fenrir, how did it go?"

Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I talked about quests with

a fellow adventurer and friend. Simon was the researcher type, while Will was a prince. Both of them technically had experience doing quests, but they couldn't exactly be called adventurers.

In all of Spada, I had not one adventurer acquaintance I could banter with. Wait... oh no. I wasn't just lacking friends, I lacked even acquaintances.

"It went very well actually. Of course, it was a powerful monster, but we had planned and prepared for it perfectly. You could say it was a rather easy quest."

Oh yeah, we did that too. We prepared for a lot of possibilities, but still got almost done in. I didn't tell her that though. Mostly out of embarrassment.

Nell wasn't bragging or anything, but simply talking about it like it was another day on the job, while I was doing my very best to maintain a poker face and answering her with some short and appropriate replies.

"But for a quest, it's sort of surprising how lively the whole village is."

"That is because this Fenrir Subjugation quest would've become an Emergency Quest in a few more days."

The mention of Emergency Quest instantly put my senses on alert.

But I quickly calmed myself once Nell explained the details. This Emergency Quest would apparently not have been as urgent as Iskia's rescue quest or Alzas' defence quest. Those in and of themselves were very much exceptions among Emergency Quests.

Nell told me about how the Fenrir, whose habitat should have been deeper in the Asbel Mountains, had descended closer to the village and had been sporadically attacking for a while.

Including this village itself, the Fenrir had been spotted various times on both the south highway towards Avalon's capital city and the north highway to Windham, one of Avalon's neighbouring nations. It had attacked travellers and merchant caravans alike, the normal fair in terms of casualties when this kind of thing happens.

This sort of thing happened a lot in this world, but it was certainly no laughing matter for the victims and their families. If it'd been a pack of Slimes or Goblins,

they could've put up a request for the local adventurers to handle. But the issue wasn't mobs but a Fenrir, the 2nd most powerful of the monsters in the Asbel Mountains, and ranked 5 at that. The average adventurer wouldn't risk it.

That was where Wing Road came in. They had heard the rumors and had come to take on the quest, and the villagers were of course overjoyed. Come to the present, and Wing Road didn't disappoint.

"You guys really did a great job, I mean it."

"Oh no, we were just lucky this time."

She wasn't just being humble, but the circumstances this time were very much in their favor.

If they had wanted to challenge a Fenrir in its own grounds, they'd have to go into the very depths of the Asbel Mountains. The Lust Rose had made its residence in a relatively shallow region compared to these ferocious silver wolves. Fenrirs made their natural habitat 3 to 4 mountains further from the Lust Rose's cave, an area that truly was of a rank 5 danger rating.

Even disregarding the various monsters that lived there, that central part of the Asbel Mountains was so perilous by its very nature, that it was practically impregnable.

"We wouldn't have taken this quest at all if it hadn't come that close to the village. Even we can't fight that deep in the mountains."

Despite her full trust in her strong older brother and dependable party members, Nell firmly believed that they shouldn't and wouldn't go that deep. This was not only due to the harsh climate and distance from civilization, but because of a more fundamental reason.

"You mean the Ice Zero Field? So even Wing Road can't handle it there huh."

There existed an area in the Asbel Mountains that nullified the power of Divine Protections: The Ice Zero Field, a zone that effectively *froze* an adventurer's most powerful abilities.

Almost any rank 5 adventurer possessed some manner of Divine Protection, and that ultimate power of theirs would become completely useless. The

stronger that Protection made them, the weaker they would get without it.

“Yes, no one in our party has a strong ice element Divine Protection after all.”

The only exception to this rule was if one had a Divine Protection that leaned heavily on the Ice element. That particular sort of Protection would, in contrast, get powered up when used in that zone.

This phenomenon has been interpreted such that the Ice Zero Field is an area so dense in ice elemental mana that Protections derived from other elements simply can't overcome it and manifest.

In my time adventuring, I've also been to areas and regions that favored some attributes of magic over others, and even non-adventurers, if they had any aptitude for magic, they would easily be able to sense the difference.

A sea favored water, a volcano liked fire and frigid mountains put priority on ice mana. As an example from my own experience, in our quest to the Revival Catacombs, darkness magic reigned.

Places like that affected the way spells manifested their effects and sometimes even affected the health of an elemental caster. Divine Protections were not an exception either, as they had a tendency to work (or not) in strange ways when they were out of their element. This concept was already common knowledge to anyone living in the continent of Pandora, adventurer or otherwise.

And since knowledge of what mana resided in and what was hindered in what dungeon was so important, the information was readily available to peruse at the local guilds.

This sort of mystic natural phenomena were part of laws that governed this world and extreme regions that greatly affected even Divine Protections were given special names; the Ice Zero Field is but one such example.

This was especially true for any areas that had been discovered to outright nullify one's Protection since they were all deemed rank 5 zones without exception.

And with those areas usually tilting the balance drastically towards one element, the monsters that could be encountered there all possessed

abnormally strong abilities pertaining to said element. This further contributed to the heightened danger level and there were even theories that the monsters themselves possessed some sort of Divine Protections popped up in magic focused scholarly circles.

Further theories also postulate that the reason other attributes are unusable is because the part of the pantheon that governed those lands themselves refused to allow any Divine Protection in which they had no involvement.

In more concrete terms, if this land happens to be a sacred homeland or a site that boasts some legend, it can also grant leverage to specific Protections. The one I was most familiar with was the Fairy Garden's Spring of Light, Lily's home, and the place where she could naturally return to her true form.

Basically, the many theories made sense with how this world worked... and whether it was natural phenomena or Gods' will that denied certain Divine Protections, the fact of the matter was, that such places existed and had to be handled with caution.

I didn't care why this sort of phenomena existed, but I was glad it did. While it meant that my own Divine Protections could be hindered, it might also mean that certain places exist that weaken the White God's powerful Protection.

"Even if we're strong, we also have to pick and choose the quests that fit our level. Rank 5 parties do practically the same things as any other party after all, just on a higher scale."

Nell said, her expression the very picture of diligence. I couldn't find even a hint of egotism or conceit in her words, which made me suddenly think that she must've had a very good upbringing. Avalon grew its princesses into fine and respectable ladies.

"But still, the fact that you can be smart about it and choose appropriate quests is a skill too. If it was us, we couldn't have done it this cleanly."

"Oh no, ... well actually, if you were to take this quest in particular, I think you might've done it better than we did."

No, I really wouldn't. My hypothetical plan had been already decided: chop off the head and then crush it into paste. In other words, I couldn't have had it

displayed so cleanly in the central plaza like Wing Road had done.

I didn't say that though, and only replied that she was elevating me too much. It'd be great if she took that as me humbling myself.

"Kurono-kun, try to guess why this Fenrir went berserk."

"Hm. Was it a... parasite?"

That was the first thing I thought of. Well, it was the only thing I thought of.

My *experience* with that was just that impactful. Though now the Sloth was another weapon in my arsenal and a good one at that. It wasn't its game over once you have you work, but its game over so I'll make you work.

"*Ufufu*, it's not that, but you were close."

And here I thought that she was laughing at me because I had it completely wrong.

Since she said I was *close*, it might mean that the Fenrir was also being controlled. So maybe there was an evil mage out there mind controlling the monster—uh, no. Not likely. If that were the case, they'd have a more serious problem on their hands.

"What was it then?"

"A cursed weapon."

She described how, when they found the Fenrir in question, its fur wasn't the glistening silver it was famous for, but completely black. Not only that, the rank 5 monsters even had a black aura exuding from its body giving off an even darker impression.

You didn't need to be a Priest like Nell to figure out that the monster had been already tainted by evil.

"After we defeated it, we found a sword lodged inside its stomach. It was a beautifully ornamented rapier, and it held a powerful curse inside."

I wagered a guess that this cursed rapier had been wielded by a cursed weapon user like myself. But unfortunately for them, the Fenrir was too strong, and they became its meal.

But then, the Fenrir itself lost to the curse that was now inside its stomach.

“I see, that must’ve been a pain to deal with...”

It is generally ill-advised to get near any weapons deemed as cursed. For me, they might be tools that I greatly rely on, but this sort of story reminded me that what I so readily used on a daily basis can actually be very dangerous.

“That’s why I said you might’ve done better, since you’re so good at controlling cursed weapons.”

“Well yeah, I can control, but I can’t exactly dispel them.”

Honestly, if it were me, I might’ve had a tough fight anyway. Of course, we wouldn’t lose. With Lily and Fiona backing me up, Element Masters will never lose in a head on battle!

“Ah, I have an idea, Kurono-kun. How about you take that rapier?”

“Eh, can I?”

No, of course I can’t.

Cursed weapons were generally sold for high prices, no actually, they’d definitely make a small fortune if they sold it to the Mordred Firm. I bet that they’d even showcase it in the next Cursed Carnival, grandly proclaiming how it ousted even a Fenrir and spread fear and turmoil all around the Asbel region and what not.

“But of course. We don’t have anyone who can use it anyway.”

Who knows, that girl Safiel might just be able to. Not her Servants, but on her own.

That aside, as an adventurer, I felt like I couldn’t take such a valuable item they’d fought and earned.

“No, I can’t take it after all. Actually, I’ve been receiving so much from you, I really feel like I need to give something back.”

I declined her offer and in addition implied that we were also getting a big payout for our Lust Rose quest.

Plus, there was all the gear from the Lust Rose’s previous victims, which were

now ours. It'd take somewhat of a big fee to get the guild to carry it all back, but it should still earn us a bonus.

My wallet was fat enough that I would gladly gift her a present or two.

"Eh! K-Kurono-kun, you're giving me a present... I, I..."

She might've said 'I don't need it you loser,' but I didn't think that was the case. Looking at her blushing face and both hands holding her cheeks going 'Kyah!' I think it's safe to say that she didn't dislike the prospect.

Plus, her trademark wings were also flapping in place like crazy which made me imagine that she might fly off like that.

Being a princess and all, Nell must've received presents all her life, but perhaps a situation like this, where I, a private friend of hers, would give her a gift was one she hadn't experienced before.

It's sort of a cliché that a princess aspired towards commonplace things... but here it was, a real princess doing just that.

"Sure, once we get back to Spada, I'll be sure to pick out something——"

Maybe it was too soon to be that friendly with Nell, because,

"——Kurono!!"

"Wh!? Lily!?"

Suddenly, Lily had called my name from behind, her tone sharp. I turned around slowly, fearing how badly I was going to get scolded for my overfamiliar treatment of the princess——

"Did something happen?"

She was in her original form.

She had grown taller while wearing the same white punrobe and I could see her sexy, supple legs bared all the way to her upper thighs, but more importantly, her face.

Her expression was extremely serious. In this world, Lily was the person I had known the longest, and I could instantly tell that something had happened.

I changed gears to match her expression, and without bothering to think if it

was rude to Nell, I focused completely on Lily's next words.

"The guild had a letter addressed to you. The sender is King Leonhard."

Lily handed over the letter in question, which was red wax sealed with Spada's national emblem, the crown and crossing swords.

I had seen the same emblem, but in stamp version, when I received the Emergency Quest from Will in the Grand Colosseum's infirmary.

The seal hadn't been broken, meaning Lily hadn't checked the contents inside, but had still realized that this was a letter of grave importance.

That went the same for me, and my hands even slightly trembled as they were about to unseal the wax.

Inside, there was a single letter, and as my eyes went over each line of it, the cold sweat gathering in my face clearly told that our urgency was justified.

"... And, what does it say?"

Asked Lily, her tone calm.

My heart was pounding, but I had to be completely direct about this. Calming myself, I replied,

"— — The Crusaders are coming."